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JOHN M. "JACK" KENNY

BOTH SIDES NOW:
A CONSENSUS BUILDER'S JOURNEY
FROM FIELD WORKER AND UNION LEADER
TO TOP MANAGER AT THE
EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT

East Bay 
Regional Park District

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East Bay Regional Park District

John M. “Jack” Kenny

Both Sides Now:
A Consensus Builder’s Journey
From Field Worker and Union Leader to Top Manager
at the East Bay Regional Park District

with comments by
Annie Kenny

interview conducted on May 5, 2017 by
Laura McCreery
Oral History Project Director
Institute for the Study of Societal Issues
for the archival collection of
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and an informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record.

The recordings for the oral history of John M. Kenny, retired staff member of the East Bay Regional Park District, were transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed in draft by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is made available through research libraries for scholarly use. The original recordings are preserved in the Digital Preservation Repository of the California Digital Library.

Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project
University of California, Berkeley

Interviewee: John M. "Jack" Kenny

Interviewer: Laura McCreery

Interview Date: May 5, 2017

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McCreery:

Good morning on May the 5th, 2017. This is Laura McCreery speaking, and I'm here in Albany, California at the home of Jack Kenny, and we're conducting an oral history interview today. Good morning.

Kenny:

Good morning.

McCreery:

Let me ask you to start us off by stating your date of birth and then talking about where you were born.

Kenny:

All right. I was born September 8th, 1948. I was born in Richmond, California at the Richmond hospital. I was an only child, and my parents were James and Helen Kenny of Richmond. My dad, James Kenny, came from a line of political leaders in Richmond and west Contra Costa County. His father, John Kenny—which is my real name, John Kenny—I go by Jack—he emigrated from Ireland around 1890 or so. I found this out recently, actually, that he and his brother worked at Port Costa. Apparently there were a lot of Irish that were hired to work on the grain ships, loading the grain ships at Port Costa.

But then they eventually ended up in Richmond, and my grandfather was one of the founders of the city of Richmond. When they incorporated they had a group of founders—trustees, I think they called them—and he was one of those. They helped form the city of Richmond. He ran a pool hall and bar on Washington Street in Point Richmond. That's where my father was born. They had two sons and a daughter.

The older son was Joseph Kenny, and he got elected to the Richmond City Council. He was sort of the progressive wing of Richmond politics at the time, and a lot of Richmond politics, from what I've learned, was controlled by Chevron—Standard Oil at the time. They had a lot of influence in the politics in Richmond, so the progressives were trying to have more of a populist approach to city affairs. Anyway, he was elected to the city council. At one point—I'm not sure of the year—maybe it was 1940, 1942—he was attempting to run for state senate. But World War II broke out, and he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, and he was killed overseas in New Guinea. His plane went down.

My dad was also in the service. He was in the Navy. But when he came back from the war, he was a union representative. He was a shop steward. He was part of the Union Oil refinery strike in 1948, the year I was born.

Then, a few years later, he ran for city council, kind of to follow in his brother's footsteps. So he was elected to the city council, again on the progressive wing of the city council. There were my dad and another councilman, Vargas, who were part of a team. So he got elected to that. He had his rotation as mayor of Richmond.

I got to see a lot of the country because of that. He'd go to different conferences. I'd get to go to New York and Washington, DC, and places like that.

McCreery:

You were able to accompany him on those trips?

Kenny:

Yes. I'd go with my mom and my dad. Then in 1958 he ran for the Contra Costa County board of supervisors, and he won that election. Then he was reelected three more times, so he was on the board for twenty years. I guess it was five times he was elected because it's a four-year term.

McCreery:

How much do you remember about that first election to the supervisor?

Kenny:

I don't remember much at all because I was only ten. I just remember it was an upset because there were a number of people running. The former supervisor had retired, so it was an open seat. But then subsequent to that he was opposed by some very conservative John Birch types a couple of times, so he was known as more the progressive wing of the Contra Costa County board of supervisors.

I think that's where I got my interest in politics and union things and in public service. One of the things that was an issue for my dad was that he pledged that he would be a full-time supervisor, that he wouldn't take another job while he was supervisor, which a lot of supervisors did at the time. They didn't devote all of their time to being the supervisor.

He pledged that, and he lived up to it. He didn't get a lot of income because of that, but he stuck to his word.

McCreery:

As an aside, what was his career before politics?

Kenny:

He had been the union rep for the oil workers, and then after that he was in real estate. He was a real estate broker.

McCreery:

A pledge of full-time duties as a supervisor. How important was that to his constituents, do you think?

Kenny:

It seemed to be an issue, that they wanted people who were taking the job seriously and devoting as much time as they could to what—the constituents wanted to have access to someone. That was right in the time, in the late fifties and early sixties, of the civil rights era that was happening. I have photos of my dad with—he met Martin Luther King, Jr., and there's a photo of an angry Stokely Carmichael in his office berating him for something. [Laughter]

So there were a lot of things happening. I think people in the Richmond end of Contra Costa County wanted someone that they could contact and who would fight for them.

McCreery:

What was your dad's style in his political role? How did he operate?

Kenny:

He was the consensus builder, and he was very open and friendly. People liked to be around him. He lived with us, actually, in the later part of his life after my mom died. We had built this wing of the house for them to come here because my mom was disabled. So we had this built with a disabled access restroom and disabled access coming in. Because that was already built it was logical for him to move in here.

So we got a full taste of his personality, ten years at the end. [Laughter] Annie got most of it. But he was a very big person, not only in stature but also in the way his personality came across. There was a lot of joking and telling stories and teasing people.

McCreery:

Realizing how young you were when he first started the supervisor role, what do you remember about the kinds of issues that were important and what he was working on?

Kenny:

I know there were things like medical care in west Contra Costa, especially for poor people. That was a big issue. I'm trying to think what other things came up.

I know one that was very dear to his heart was because he was on the board when the different counties that were included in BART had to vote whether to put it on the ballot. He was one of the two who was in favor of putting it on the ballot, and I guess San Francisco and Alameda County were for it, so that was no problem. But Contra Costa was a little bit wavering. If Contra Costa didn't join, then the whole thing could have collapsed.

They had two people in favor, one was my dad, and then two people against. They had a wavering vote, an undecided, from Brentwood, Joe Silva. So my dad tells all these stories about how Joe Silva was being wine and dined by Governor Pat Brown and all these

people to convince him to—taking him out on the bay on a bay cruise to convince him to vote for putting it on the ballot, which he did.

But my dad said he always regretted that he didn't hold out on his vote to get more of the Bay Area included in BART. He thought that they too easily let San Mateo County and Marin County off the hook—and not part of it—and he thought that really should have been the system that got built.

McCreery:

I'm glad you brought that up because, really, that was such an era when the idea of regional planning was starting to rise up, and I associate some of that interest with another local politician, the legislator Jack Knox.

Kenny:

Yes, exactly.

McCreery:

I wonder if you recall any particular discussion or involvement with regional planning issues aside from BART?

Kenny:

Yes. My dad was also on the ABAG board, and so I heard a lot of some of the discussion about regional planning issues and whether there should be regional government. I think he was more fighting to make sure Contra Costa had its own voice, so he was a little bit counter to letting there be some supreme authority on those kinds of things. But he was also on the Bay Area air pollution board, and he served with Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, who were all supervisors at the time.

McCreery:

Other local politicians.

Kenny:

Right, exactly. Yes, you're right. The regional planning was a big issue at the time, and there was a whole issue about—[phone interruption]

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McCreery:

You mentioned your dad serving with Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer on this Bay Area air pollution board, and I think you were starting to say there was an issue about something to do with that?

Kenny:

Not directly connected to that, although that was an issue. In west Contra Costa it was pollution from the refineries, and I think it was connected to the whole idea of redevelopment of older towns like Richmond and how a lot of people were leaving the inner city and

moving into the suburbs, and how to balance the approach to social services and equity of tax dollars in those areas.

McCreery:

Let's turn for a moment to your mom's side of the family. What do you know about her background and her life before she met your dad?

Kenny:

She was the daughter of Irish immigrants. I didn't know my grandfather on that side because he died a few years before I was born, Michael Nugent. But they lived in Richmond. My mother's mother, my grandmother Nora, came from Galway. My grandfather worked for Standard Oil, and they had four kids, three girls and a boy.

My mother was the youngest, Helen. She, I think, actually was born in San Pablo, and they grew up in Richmond. She worked for the IRS in San Francisco doing clerical work and met my dad through various social circles and church things in the forties. Then my dad went off to the war, and when he came back that's when they got together and got married.

McCreery:

You mentioned church activities. What was your religious upbringing?

Kenny:

Roman Catholic.

McCreery:

And how important a facet of family life was that for you?

Kenny:

It was very important. It was something that both my mother and father were—I don't say they were hard-line on, but they were very regular attendees and devoted, and they made sure that I was raised that way and knew about that. That influenced me. I went to Catholic school in Richmond for grammar school. At the end of eighth grade, I was so taken by it that I decided to go become a priest and went to the seminary at age fourteen.

McCreery:

Where was that?

Kenny:

In Mountain View. It was St. Joseph's College High School seminary. Yes, so it was a very important part of my life and their life, and I felt I wanted to give back to them by becoming a priest. I thought they'd be very proud of me, to be a priest, and they were. They were a little bit disappointed that I decided to drop out after seven years.

McCreery:

What was your experience at St. Joseph's?

Kenny:

It was great. It was a classical education, as I've come to know it now. It was really steeped in Latin. I had six years of Latin and three years of ancient Greek, studying Plato in the original Greek, and philosophy. I didn't have a lot of science, but that's understandable. And classics, and English, and public speaking. I thought it gave me a lot of confidence to do public speaking because of that.

But the thing that was different for me was that when I went—there's always this example that's given as the data of the seminaries. The way the Catholic seminary works is that, at the time anyway, four years of high school, four years of college, and then four years of post-graduate theological. Then you would be ordained if you got through all that, twelve years. They say that over the history of that seminary, the people who started after eighth grade, at age fourteen, and went the whole twelve years and became a priest—it was averaging about 17 percent made it all the way through. My class had the distinction of being the first one where everyone quit. [Laughter]

I think it was a reflection of the times because the world was changing, especially the church, because the church had John XXIII as the pope, who decided to open things up with Vatican II. When I first started, it was like a monastery. There were strict rules of silence at night and during Lent and during meals and a lot of different prayer sessions.

Then a couple of years later we got a new president of the college who wanted to make the seminary more like the way Pope John XXIII wanted to open up the church. It got to where they started relaxing the rules more and more, to where you didn't even have to go to mass anymore if you didn't want to.

The idea was, they were having too many young men who would go through the process and end up becoming priests and then, after they were out, they would discover women and other things that distracted them, and they would quit. They had devoted all this time and energy and resources to training people to become priests, and then they'd lose them. So they said, "We've got to get people to understand what the world is like while they're here and make their own decision about what they want to be before they get to that point."

That's what happened to me is I was getting exposed to all different things. It was the Summer of Love and all that happening, so I decided, "I like making films, and those girls looked kind of good, too. [Laughter] So I'm going to maybe see what's out there." That's when I dropped out.

McCreery:

What was going to be next for you? Did you have much idea? You mentioned filmmaking and girls.

Kenny:

Yes. [Laughter] At one point I was thinking of taking my dad's old pool hall in Point Richmond and turn it into a theater and having a film thing there. I went to S.F. State, got

into the film program and graduated doing that. But then I started realizing what the economics of that was. In order to make films, you have to raise money or you have to find some way to get a job doing it. The in meantime, through my dad—he got me a job with the park district during the summer, and so I started working for Jerry Kent one summer. It was right after I had left the seminary.

McCreery:

This would have been early seventies, then?

Kenny:

Sixty-nine.

McCreery:

Oh, sixty-nine. Before you graduated and so on. Yes.

Kenny:

Yes. Then I worked a couple of summers while I was still going to college, and then I started thinking, “I think I could actually make a living working in the parks.” [Laughter] The filmmaking looked a little too iffy, so that’s what I decided and that’s how my career started.

McCreery:

What was the draw of filmmaking, though?

Kenny:

A creative outlet. One of things I started when I was at the seminary was a film club. The administration allowed me to order classic foreign films or just classic films, and we showed them on a regular basis. Again, the seminary was opening up, and they wanted to get other influences. So we were showing Kurosawa, and things from India from Satyajit Ray, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Ingmar Bergman.

So that was opening my mind, too, and so I wanted to try doing that. I was very influenced by the Beatles. The Beatles were big when I was in the seminary, and I loved seeing their movies. I wanted to do things like that. While I was at the seminary I was making movies. I made one that was a time travel history of the world. [Laughter] We did all kinds of crazy things, like the assassination of Julius Caesar. We filmed that at the Palace of Fine Arts because it looked like a Roman area. We did a number of things that may be connected to our Latin and Greek studies. [Laughter]

McCreery:

It’s a way you can explore almost anything. How did that interest in filmmaking continue for you, even though it may have been in the background as time went on?

Kenny:

Jerry Kent knew that I was interested in film, and so there were a couple of times that he actually assigned me to do some of the filming for the park district. There was an issue—I think this was probably, yes, when I was working for him in 1969—there was—I don’t know

if you know about Apperson Quarry? Yes, if you interviewed Dick Trudeau, you'd know. In order to convince the outside forces who wanted Apperson Ridge to be quarried, they wanted just a panning shot showing the relationship of where Sunol was to Apperson Quarry. It was just a short little thing, but it was something that I got involved with doing filming at the parks. I did other little projects over the years.

McCreery:

What else did Jerry have you doing that first summer?

Kenny:

What I was doing for him? I was an intern. He had this project to figure out what the park attendance was, and so he wanted it to be set up where I would be with a few other people and we would actually go to various parks at different times during the day and different days during the week to do spot checks on attendance and try to come up with some formula where we could extrapolate what monthly and annual attendance for those parks were.

McCreery:

You mentioned that your dad was able to get you that early connection to the park district. How did he know anybody, or how did he do that?

Kenny:

I think he knew Dick Trudeau from, I guess, dealings with the county and the park district.

McCreery:

So that was a summer assignment, and then you got to know Jerry and he got to see your work and so on. What happened next in that connection, vis-à-vis your schooling and everything?

Kenny:

When I worked for Jerry I hadn't been accepted into San Francisco State yet, so it actually went beyond the summer and I continued into late fall and winter. Then I think it started in the spring semester at SF State, and I checked back to the park district if I could come back in the summer for a temporary job.

At the time they had three-month temporary jobs in the parks. The title of the job changed over the years. I think it was park aide or park groundsman, temporary. So I came back. I worked in Redwood Park for the first summer, the second summer I worked at Las Trampas, and the third summer I worked at Kennedy Grove.

At the time there was some debate, and I know the union was involved in this because they had twelve-month park aide or park groundsman positions, and everything else was a temporary position with no benefits and no return rights or any of that. But they had the three-month temporary positions, six-month temporary positions, and nine-month temporary positions. They were exploiting the nine-month people because they liked these people—they would hire them back for nine months and then they'd lay them off, and they'd never know if they were going to come back or not.

So that became a big issue in the early seventies. The union was asking the park district to make the nine-month people regular employees, and so they created a nine-month permanent position. I applied for one of those, and there happened to be an opening at Kennedy Grove. I got hired as a nine-month park aide.

McCreery:

Kennedy Grove, nine months, but then what happens at the end of the nine months?

Kenny:

Then you're laid off. It was always the winter season, the slow time. And you're automatically rehired the next February.

McCreery:

So it repeats with that three-month layoff in the interim. Say a little about those early parks that you worked in. What was the scene there for people working on site?

Kenny:

Very different than the way it is now. I remember Redwood Park in particular, and I think the experiences that were happening in not only Redwood but other parks at the time, in the late sixties or early seventies, that they were designed for autos more than they were for public use of the park for recreation. You had a situation where at Redwood Park you could drive really far into the park—and different areas where you could have a picnic or stop and go hike or whatever you wanted to do.

But the clientele that was using the parks at that time was mostly young people, and they were mostly young people who were using alcohol or drugs or both. There was a very tense, mean spirit sometimes because people would get too wasted or too drunk, and they'd start fighting. The regional park cops would have to come in.

And I think that led to some of the changes. Redwood Park got completely redesigned, and all those roads got taken out as far as public access. Everything was retreated toward the front or toward the entrance of the park so that it was more contained.

It was like a gauntlet. Even if you were not police, like I was, we were considered the enemy. You'd be driving with your park truck that had the park symbol. You were the authority. You were the man. So a lot of times it was very tense. On the weekends you'd see people lined up, itching for a fight.

At Las Trampas not so much, but when I worked at Kennedy Grove, Kennedy Grove also took care of Briones, and Briones was a fairly new park. But it was the same thing. You'd go out there sometimes, especially on really nice spring weekend days, and everybody would be out there. Half the people would be naked. [Laughter] And there would be, sometimes, people just getting too far out of line. The regional parks police would be there in their riot gear, helicopters overhead. It was very different.

McCreery:

How adequate was the park staffing for what was going on there?

Kenny:

In Redwood it wasn't too bad because that was more an established park. But Briones and Las Trampas—those were fairly new, so it was fairly skimpy as far as the amount of staff.

McCreery:

What kinds of duties did you have in those settings?

Kenny:

It was park maintenance. It was cleaning up the litter and the garbage, the bathrooms, doing trail work, fence repair, talking to the public, just the basic things of operating the park, opening and closing the gates, opening them up in the morning or locking them at night.

McCreery:

You mentioned what a time of change it was, and here's a manifestation with all these young people using the parks this way. It was also still very much in the thick of the Vietnam War at the time you started. What effect did that have, not only on your own life but on the working environment, as you recall it now?

Kenny:

It made for some tense times, not only between the park employees and the public, but also among the employees themselves because there were some people there who were older and maybe veterans themselves, and people like myself who were the hippies and who—I didn't get drafted. My number never got called. So I think there was some resentment about that. It was a tense time.

It was right around the time that the union was starting to change, too. That was probably the thing that got me involved in the union was the issue about the nine-monthers being temporary and not having status. I think my background, my family background of politics and trying to make things better for people and trying to work out situations—I was drawn to try to get involved in that and try to find a solution that was fair to everyone.

McCreery:

What were your earliest direct involvements with the union, and what was the scene in those years before the strike?

Kenny:

It was not a lot of involvement by most people in the workforce. It was more, I guess—some people would characterize it as the complainers were the ones who were always agitating and trying to organize something to combat the district. They always said the district was the bad guy. They needed to make the district look really bad so that people would get revved up to try to do something about what was happening.

But I see it as connected with what I would say was Jerry Kent's philosophy. It may have been more than just Jerry, but his idea was that the people who worked in even the lowest level of the park district, the ones who interfaced with the public, needed to be well-rounded people. So this gets to my first experience with the union. It tended to be a lot of people who didn't have a lot of education who were in the leadership. They were more rabble-rousers than really trying to come up with rational solutions all the time.

Jerry's idea—I didn't know it at the time, but I found out later—was that he wanted to get more college-educated people hired in the lower levels of the park district. So I think that's why people like me and other people at the same time got hired, because you had people who could articulate themselves with the public, could be more knowledgeable about various issues that were happening, both park and natural resource issues and social issues.

So a lot of us got hired at the time. We thought it was a good job. It had good benefits. Working nine months a year? Hey, that was great. We wanted to do that, but also I think we brought something to the equation that wasn't there before, which was a higher level of awareness and communication ability. So that's why I was interested in becoming involved in the union, because I wanted to fight for some of these fairness issues but I liked the job, too.

McCreery:

It's a challenging thing, though, to enter a bigger role in union activity when it's been going a certain way and you see a need for a little different approach. What kind of style did you adopt in becoming involved?

Kenny:

At first I was more just an observer trying to figure out how things were working. But it seemed that the people who were in the leadership of the union were more the old guard. They were in the trades. They were plumbers or carpenters or electricians, and they had more conservative values. They didn't seem as open to include more people, and I guess that's what I wanted to bring was more inclusiveness and open debate on things so that people would buy into the things that we wanted to accomplish.

McCreery:

Realizing the membership was tied to job positions, how large a union was it at that time?

Kenny:

I think at the time there were two different unions. There was one for rank-and-file people who were working in operations and maintenance. Then there was another one for clerical and professional people.

That was one of the big changes that happened, I think it was around 1972, was that they merged those two together to make one body. So the non-professional, the rank-and-file operation and maintenance, that was probably 200 people, and the professional-clericals was probably seventy-five to a hundred. Then it got merged together.

McCreery:

How effective was the leadership when you started observing, in terms of what they were trying to accomplish? What did you note there?

Kenny:

What I noted is they tended to just bring up issues when it was contract time, and the day-to-day things, especially for people who worked in the parks, didn't seem to be as important. It was more about wages and benefits, as opposed to the nine-month issue. It was only because a group of people kept lobbying the union to take notice of it that it actually got included in there.

One of the things that was important for me once I was in union leadership was that I wanted to recognize and have the people who worked in the field and the parks given more status and given more attention than they had in the past.

You may have heard of a former chief of parks, Bob Blau, and he was one of the people who started the union in 1959. I didn't hear it directly from him, but somebody told me that he said that as long as the union was guided by or had leaders who were not directly giving service to the public like the field staff, the park people, that it was not going to be truly representative of the needs of everybody. It would be too elitist or too concentrated on the people who—the old guard. I don't know if I'm describing it right, but he thought that the union would really only succeed once the field park people were in control of the union.

That's what happened with the strike, and leading up to it the nine-month thing was one of the precursors of this. So it really got to the point where, because the strike happened and everyone had to pull together, we realized that we had a lot of talent out there, and people who worked as park maintenance people could be union president or could be shop steward and started running for those offices and started getting elected.

McCreery:

How closely did Bob Blau's thoughts about this align with your own?

Kenny:

Completely. I saw that sometimes when you had someone from the trades as the union president, there were rumors of possible corruption, that they could be influenced and something held over them so that they might not represent people as well as they could. Whereas people in the field didn't have that much to lose if they were in charge. So I think it became more egalitarian because of having more park people in leadership roles.

McCreery:

Say more about the events and situations that led up to deciding to go out on strike in 1975.

Kenny:

At the time, 1972, that's when I first became a nine-month park aide, and in 1973—I'm trying to think of the—yes, 1973, I was still at Kennedy Grove as a nine-month park aide. There was a study that was done at the time that the park district and the union had agreed to

as part of their negotiations that was looking at—I'm trying to remember exactly—I don't know the title, but it was something about the salary structure of the park district. There was some term for it—I'd have to look it up—it's when you agree to—a fact-finding. That's it. It was a fact-finding agreement, and they were going to look at how things were structured in the park district and how salaries were structured.

At least the union people felt the park district didn't follow through on that fact-finding report, and so there was a lot of anger and bad feelings that we'd been betrayed. So it was going into another negotiation, and this issue hadn't been settled. The district hired an outside lawyer to be their negotiations person in the contract negotiations.

Since I've been on both sides, now, of collective bargaining I know sometimes the first set of proposals that come out can be a little bit out of line or outrageous. But these seemed to be really outrageous, and they caught everyone's attention. More people started showing up to union meetings than ever before, and people were getting nervous and scared about what was being proposed.

The major thing that was being proposed was that, who could be in the bargaining unit for the union, and who would be excluded? At the time, the bargaining unit included, for park people, everyone from the field level, the park maintenance operations people, the park supervisor, the park manager, the chief level—were all considered in the bargaining unit. The district proposed taking everyone from park supervisor up out and putting them into management.

For the union people that was like taking half of the bargaining unit away. It seemed like a real threat to whether or not we'd have good jobs and good benefits. A lot of the people who were in some of those upper levels didn't want to go into management either because they felt the district was too autocratic or could make decisions arbitrarily. They felt better if they had the protection of being in the union. They could fight for their rights if something got threatened, but they wouldn't have those rights if they were taken out.

So that was the big issue. But there were other things, like you could be fired if you had a non-disciplinary issue. For example, if you were prone to getting poison oak you could be fired because you were not compatible with the job. So there were just enough of those incendiary things in there that it got people riled up and got people to say, "We've got to do something about this."

Every year, apparently—I only knew a couple of contract negotiations before 1975, but I knew that every year the union would threaten to go on strike. It would never go on strike, and no one believed it when they'd threaten it. So they had this set of new proposals, which seemed even more extreme than ever before.

People got in the union hall to decide, and some of the most unlikely people were there saying, "We can't stand for this. We have to tell the park district, when the contract expires April 1st, if we can't get them to change their position we're going on strike."

Most people were saying, "Let's try to work it out. Let's see if we can do something less drastic than striking to work out an agreement."

But there were some people there who just were so incensed by the thing that they said, "Let's put it to a vote." They put it to a vote, and the vote was, if we don't get a change in their response by April 2nd or 3rd, then we're going on strike, and it passed.

McCreery:

What was the margin, approximately? Do you have any remembrance of that?

Kenny:

I don't remember exactly, but I don't think it was that close. I think it was a pretty good majority. I didn't feel personally that it was time to go on strike. I had just been a permanent employee for a couple of years, you know. [Laughter] I was married and was concerned about finances. My style is to try to work things out and to get people to maybe look at things from both sides and try to work toward the middle.

People were so incensed, and I think that part of it also was the personality of the lead negotiator for the park district. He came on so strong. That really got people turned off toward him and figuring that the district had something up their sleeve that they really wanted to do.

McCreery:

And if he was an outsider, that was another threat, almost, inherently.

Kenny:

Yes, right. So it passed, and that really was when I became more involved in the union, at that point. The idea for the strike was, the way the parks are set up, there are so many places that people could get into the park that it really doesn't make sense to put up a picket line and try to keep people from getting into the park. What you need to do is persuade the public that you have a good cause, and you're more there to give information and let people know that there's a strike and what the issues are than to confront people and say, "Don't come in here."

That was the approach that was taken was to put up a picket line, or picket stations, at a number of different park locations and really to say, "This is our issue, and please support us," and that kind of thing. Then it would be up to the park district—because the parks weren't shut down, the parks were open—somebody had to maintain the parks. Somebody had to keep operating them. The idea was, "Well, we're going into April, spring weather. People are not going to put up with trash everywhere. The grass is going to be so high that it needs to be cut. They're going to need us."

We tried that, and April was the worst weather ever in April. It actually snowed. [Laughter] I remember there was snow all the way through Tilden and Skyline Boulevard, so people weren't going to the parks. It was like a lost cause, almost. Then I know Jerry Kent was out taking mowers around, and he was doing the mowing himself. Somehow the parks

were still getting used and maintained, and the issues kept going on and on. It seemed like it was just going to collapse. It got in the middle of May, and we thought, "Oh, Memorial Day weekend. That might mean something." Some people started going back to work, so the morale was going down.

Then there was a hearing held at downtown Oakland, and we had a number of politicians—my dad was one of them—and state Senator Petris was there and somebody from the assembly, I can't remember exactly who. Then another person from the Alameda County board of supervisors, I think Joe Bort, was there. It was a forum for both the district and the union to present their sides in a public forum. It was local leaders trying to find a solution because it was almost two months this strike had gone on. The district's lead negotiator, from my point of view, really embarrassed himself and made the district look bad. When they questioned him about some of the tactics and some of the proposals that the district had made, his response was, "All is fair in love and war." [Laughter]

I think the public sentiment started coming back toward the park employees, and in another week it was settled and we went back to work. There were a lot of bad feelings afterward, especially people who had crossed the picket line to go back to work. The district looked at anyone who went on strike—some people got prosecuted for doing vandalism during the strike. There was a sit-in at the board of directors meeting, when they had the headquarters on Skyline Boulevard. My job was to go the Oakland jail and bail everybody out. [Laughter]

So there were a lot of bad feelings about that that lasted for years afterward. But one of the things that was accomplished was that not everyone was taken out of the bargaining unit. Actually, that was the ironic thing, is that everyone said that, "These people are just going on strike to get more money. That's the only reason they're doing it. It's not these other issues about the bargaining unit or poison oak or whatever." In the middle of the strike, the park district proposed a wage increase for everybody that was beyond what the union was asking for to try to entice people to come back to work. That didn't work.

So at that point, because the union had actually followed through on saying they were going to do a strike and they did a strike, even though it was painful and it was sixty days and all these bad feelings afterward, the union really became established as an entity at the park district and much broader-based than before. I think at that point I ran for chief steward and became the chief steward and then became more involved. I wasn't involved in negotiations at that point at all. It was after that that I became part of the negotiating-bargaining team and was elected president a few times.

McCreery:

You mentioned about which classifications would stay in and which would go out. How satisfactory was the settlement, from your point of view?

Kenny:

I think it was probably 75 percent, 80 percent acceptable. We did have some people who got put into management who didn't want to go into management, but they seemed to adapt to it

and it worked out over time. One of the main positions that did not go into management was park supervisor. In a lot of other organizations supervisors are not in the same bargaining unit, so that was unique. But that stayed, and it has contributed, I think, to the stability of the union, too.

McCreery:

I want to ask you about the administrative leadership during this time. Dick Trudeau was your general manager, really since you had begun working there and during this whole time. You mentioned he brought in an outside negotiator for this, but what was his view of all of it and what tack was he taking?

Kenny:

It was hard to know from someone in my point of view. I've heard things afterwards, but we didn't see much of him. For a lot of union people it seemed like he had gone into hiding. You could see Jerry Kent out because he'd be out trying to take care of the parks. And other managers were doing things like that. But Dick was absent from it. I've heard afterwards that he felt threatened, that—I don't know if he got death threats or what kind of threats, but that's why he wasn't around. He didn't go to the office.

McCreery:

In the immediate aftermath, as you say, some of the positions had changed, whether they were in or out. It was a sixty-day strike and a major upset, as you said, that had been threatened before but never carried out. What was the atmosphere right afterwards, and how did the union adapt to capitalize on what had happened?

Kenny:

It was tense, and there were bad feelings. Like I said, the people who crossed the picket line—they in some ways got shunned by people, and people didn't want to associate with them or talk to them unless they had to for work purposes. It took time to heal those.

One of the people who crossed the picket line worked at Tilden, and people would not say anything, wouldn't want to talk to him at all. But about ten or fifteen years later, he ended up becoming union president. He had to work to gain people's trust back and people had to be more forgiving, but it took time for that to happen.

One of the people who made the motion to go on strike was one of the first people to cross the picket line and then became a manager. So you can imagine the animosity that he had generated. People didn't like working for him, were maybe sabotaging him in some ways. It released a lot of bad feelings and things that had to be worked on over time.

McCreery:

Did that dull your interest at all in being further involved with the union?

Kenny:

No. No, I just saw it as something that had to be worked out.

McCreery:

What were your duties as a shop steward and taking on these greater roles?

Kenny:

The title was chief shop steward, and there were, I guess, eight or ten locally based shop stewards. They would represent people who were being disciplined or if they had a grievance, and my role was to advise them on what the proper procedure was and how to represent a particular employee in whatever the issue was. I got some training for it. The union sent me to the labor institute at UC Berkeley, and they had training classes there on grievances and arbitrations and negotiations.

We also had a very smart business agent who had been the business agent during the strike, who was a lawyer, Tom Rankin. I still see him today. He goes to my gym. I saw him this morning. [Laughter] He understood that, because he had people who had been through the strike and people who, like me, had some college experience and maybe that were trainable, that could take on more responsibility in the union, that he encouraged us to do that. He would do trainings for us so that we would become better representatives of people.

That's where I really got to understand the contract between the park district and the union, how it worked and what people needed to do in their job in order to be successful at their job and not get disciplined. That opened my eyes, to see how the district worked and how employee relations worked.

McCreery:

Tom Rankin sounds like an important figure in all this, particularly if he really understood very deeply what the bigger picture was.

Kenny:

Yes, exactly. He wasn't just like a wages and benefits person. He had other issues that he was involved with that he would expose us to, and we would become more knowledgeable. In turn, we'd realize that we were part of a bigger structure in the union, that we were not just the East Bay section of this union. It was AFSCME International, with headquarters in Washington, and had its whole history going back for years and had its own structure.

One of the things that we brought to AFSCME over the years was that we had an interest in environmental issues, and we brought that to the international to where they actually created a division within it on environmental issues. They held a couple conferences in Washington that I attended that dealt with the whole issue of employment versus environment and then about bringing environmental issues into union contracts—because that was one of the first things that our union at the park district did is it advocated for integrated pest management.

McCreery:

And that happened fairly early on, didn't it? Yes. So there's a great example of how it was happening in reality locally. But that was very forward thinking, too.

Kenny:

Yes, and I think that's because we had these connections. We had connections with the Sierra Club. We had connections with other groups that were working on issues. What is the name of the—oh, it was PACE, Political Action Coalition for the Environment. I don't know if you've heard of that, but it was an active political movement at the time, in the seventies. Some of the people who were involved with that were Mary Jefferds, and Harlan Kessel, Helen Burke from East Bay MUD, and a lot of people who eventually became elected officials. Jean Siri was part of that. So we got to be connected with some groups like that and have those issues become part of what the union was looking for, too.

This ties in to my personal history with the park district because after I was a nine-month at Kennedy Grove, I got a chance to get a twelve-month park groundsman job. It was just before the strike that I was going to get hired on the vegetation management crew. You may have heard of that. Vegetation management was eucalyptus. There was the big freeze in 1972, and they hired a bunch of people to come in and cut down the eucalyptus. When I was hired to be on the vegetation crew, which ended up in 1975 after the strike, then our job was to go back and cut many of the trees that had been cut in 1972 that had regrown.

And we were spraying 24-D and 245-T, aerially spraying with wands, and a lot of us were concerned about health issues and whether or not this was the right thing to do, to use this chemical. So for our own self-interest we wanted to deal with the issue and look at alternatives for use of pesticides in the parks.

McCreery:

How much information was there out there in the larger world at that time, or what models did you have elsewhere?

Kenny:

I don't think there were that many, not that I can remember. I think we were trying to find people who were doing things like that, and the integrated pest management approach was brought to us. I'm not sure exactly where it came from. I'm sure someone like Tom Rankin would remember. It might have been with UC or some places that were—maybe the Ecology Center in Berkeley, I think, was looking at.

At the time a lot of chemicals were used in the parks for not only eucalyptus but for weed control and other things. That was one of the things the union fought for, was to have a policy and also have a union position, where you had a coordinator position who had that approach and would institute the policy so that you were looking at the least amount of chemicals being used in the parks. That still exists today, and they have a joint union-management committee, and it has one of the members of the board of directors who sits on that committee to oversee the issues. A lot of things have become routine, but there's a lot less use of chemicals now than there was—and safer ones.

McCreery:

How did you take to the job of chief steward as time went on?

Kenny:

I liked it. A lot of times working in the parks and doing the regular routine maintenance, especially garbage and litter and toilets—not very intellectually stimulating. [Laughter] I guess it could be, but it was another outlet for me to be able to use my brain and to try to help people. So I enjoyed that, learning how to interpret the contract and going through a few arbitrations.

McCreery:

Aside from Tom Rankin, who could you learn from?

Kenny:

Well, there were my co-workers who were also doing some of the other positions in the union. People like Stephen Gehrett and—who else was?—Tim Gordon. He was a naturalist at Tilden. He was actually the president when the strike happened. Let me think who else was—Laura Comstock was a person that I ended up supervising, but she was involved in the union. Who else, I'm trying to think, was doing representation? There were a number of other business agents after Tom Rankin, too.

McCreery:

And how did they compare?

Kenny:

Some of them brought a lot to the position as far as technique, maybe didn't have as broad a range of connections or weren't associated with some outside issues as much. Some of them were more directed by the AFSCME organizational structure saying, "You're going to represent the park district union." So they didn't necessarily have a lot of the background about the parks that someone like Tom would have.

Gee, I'm blanking out on names of people that I know I worked with and were influential. Steve Myli, who served on the negotiating committee a few times with me. And Dave Collins. He was union president. Oh, Rachel McDonald, who is a good friend of mine. She was union president, and I learned a lot from her as far as dealing with people in situations, especially disciplinary situations. She was union president. She was also supervisor of Tilden Park and then a unit manager. Yes. I'm sure there are many others that will come to mind eventually. [Laughter]

McCreery:

That's fine. With so many hard feelings after the strike—and as you indicated, those took some years to settle out a little bit—how did you about gaining the trust of those you were representing and also the trust of the management side, where needed?

Kenny:

I think because my approach was not to be over the top and not to be outrageous on some of the issues, that I think I was more effective that way. At union meetings, I tried to present a more balanced approach to people, but that if I was representing someone I was doing it to the best of my ability to help them. I think my reputation was built on that, that I was

someone that they could trust to talk to and that I could try to do my best to help them. I don't know. That's just my perception, but I think that's why.

McCreery:

How and when did you become president yourself?

Kenny:

I think the first time was 1978, maybe. I'd have to look and see the exact dates. And then I was vice president a few times. There were a number of us who were the logical choices, and we'd rotate being president so we didn't have to take all the responsibility all the time. I was president three or four times.

I remember the last time was in the mid-nineties, probably 1994 or 1995. I was a park supervisor at the time at Anthony Chabot. That was more difficult because I had a lot of responsibility on my job, and to take time off to do contract negotiating or be involved in other meetings—there was a regular meeting between union and management once a month called “meet and confer,” and so the union president has to be there for those. So that was the last time, and then I got promoted into management in the end of 1997.

One of the things that I should mention that came out—and I think it's in the bio that I gave you—that this involvement with the international union of AFSCME and environment got them to petition Bill Clinton's administration to have someone from the union appointed to one of their advisory committees. So I got appointed to an EPA advisory committee for local government. So that was a fascinating exposure to the federal level and, plus, we'd be meeting in Washington, DC. We'd be meeting in Boston and New Orleans and all over the place and trying to just hammer out policies that were given to the EPA for advice on dealing with local issues.

McCreery:

What was the membership of that whole committee? Where all was it drawn from?

Kenny:

It was drawn from all over the country, and it was people who had expertise in various environmental fields, plus a lot of elected officials and some from interest groups too. There was a city manager from Phoenix, and there was a woman in the mayor's office in Los Angeles. There was a county supervisor from Florida. It was just a wide range of people.

McCreery:

But certainly the whole country represented, and the EPA itself, I presume. What view did you come to take of the EPA itself?

Kenny:

That it was a big bureaucracy, but that it had some amazing issues that it was dealing with, and that in some ways it was hard to penetrate because it had all these branches—and I didn't understand the structure at first—but that it had so many resources of things that were

available to it for educational purposes or for instructing people as far as policies that they could do.

Like I learned that they had done an initiative to recycle batteries in the national parks. Back at the regional parks, that was something that wasn't even on the radar. They were ahead of us as far as some of the thinking that they were doing. So to be exposed to that was really great, to bring that back. And also give the perspective of people who were in unions—or the working people—how some of these policies affected people or how they could maybe think about how these things should be filtered down to people in their daily lives, something they can incorporate.

McCreery:

How was the committee's work able to be used by the agency? What did they do with what you came up with?

Kenny:

They would have us work on various topics, and they'd put us in subcommittees, and then we would present a report. The report would go to the EPA administrator for them to do whatever they were going to do with it.

McCreery:

What did you take away from that whole connection?

Kenny:

I took away that there were some really important things being done nationally within the EPA, which is kind of sad now with the reactionary approach to what the EPA can do. And that there is a voice for working people to be made on environmental issues.

To me the exposure to what was happening in different parts of the country, by them having the meetings in different places—we would get presentations from things that were happening in different parts of the country, so I guess what I took away from it is that there's a lot of resources there, and that there are things that you can learn and can be incorporated on the local level. But they can also learn from people out in the field, out in the communities.

McCreery:

As you say, a voice for working people.

Kenny:

Yes.

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McCreery:

We're resuming again, after our break. You've just shown me the last contract you negotiated, in booklet form. What are the dates on that, and what do you recall?

Kenny:

April 1, 1995 to March 31, 1998. There's a signature page back here, where it shows who the negotiators were for both the park district and the union. There's my name there. I was vice president at the time. And Walter Yonn was our business representative. He was another one that I've learned a lot from. And Pete Volin. He was very involved going all the way back to the time of the park aides. He was one of the original park aides, like I was, those nine-monthers who became permanent nine-monthers. Anyway—oh, and Ted Radke signed for the park district. Dave Clovis is the head negotiator.

This was the last contract that I was involved with before I was promoted to management. One of the things that I was very proud of was that it was given to me, my responsibility, to produce the contract in a booklet form. Up until that time, before—I guess the first time we did it was sometime in the seventies—it was just sheets of paper that were stapled together. For people in the field it was very inconvenient.

But it required getting it all typeset and proofread and all that. But since then it's become a standard to have and made it a more useful document for people to refer to. It's got their wages. It's got their benefits. It's got their rights, as far as grievances. So I'm glad that we were able to do that.

Let me see if there's any particular thing. The Ecology Committee is what I was telling you was the joint union-management committee that reviews integrated pest management, plus other issues related to that. That's just referred to in here, but it got established long before this. I'm trying to see if there's anything in particular in this contract that was new or different.

McCreery:

And in terms of the negotiating points, I wonder what stands out this time around, if you recall?

Kenny:

Yes. I'm trying to think of what happened in those years. There were a lot of issues regarding retirement and making the retirement plan better. We were very lucky to get a really good retirement plan that I'm enjoying and my wife's enjoying, plus other benefits for retirees. Yes. I can't tell really what were the particular issues that year or at the time this contract was approved.

McCreery:

But you had a rather long run being involved in collective bargaining directly.

Kenny:

Yes, from 1975 through 1997, so a while. It probably hindered my chances of becoming a park supervisor initially because it was one of these aftermaths of the strike is that a lot of people who were involved in the union tended not to get the promotions for a few years. So I don't know if that's true or not, but it took me three tries before I became a park supervisor.

There's something I wanted to point out about this. What is it? Hmm. Oh, and I don't think it was in this particular contract. It might have been one before this. But another thing that I was very proud of as something that I pushed for from the union's point of view in negotiations was the change of title for the people who worked in the parks to have them be called park rangers. When I first started, I think I told you, I was a park aide. Then our title was changed to park groundsman. Then in the mid-seventies with more women being hired, it became changed to park groundsperson. [Laughter]

At that time, from the sixties and the early seventies, the park police were called park rangers. That's what they had on their cars was park ranger. So the average person coming to the parks from the public wouldn't know the difference, really. They'd just assume that anyone who worked in the parks was a park ranger. It was a thing that people in the field felt like, "Well, we should be called park rangers."

Then the park police dropped the title park ranger somewhere in the mid-seventies or early eighties. They wanted to be called police, so they changed their name to park police. So the title was available.

I think we tried a couple times in negotiations, and it didn't go through. But this one negotiation—and I don't know if it was this one or the one before. I remember that we were trying to hold on to that position to get it changed to park ranger, and I needed some backup. So I called Jerry Kent, who was still working at the time. [Laughter] He was an assistant general manager. I said, "Jerry, didn't you always want the people in the field to be called park rangers?"

He said, "Yes, I did."

I said, "I'm trying to get it in negotiations. I just want you to go on the record so I can say that."

So I did, and we got the title, so they've been park rangers ever since.

McCreery:

But that is an important point, not only about having the proper title for the work—particularly since the title was now available—but also, really, the entry of more women into the workforce and into those field jobs. I wonder what take the union had on including those employees, from the early times?

Kenny:

That's a very good question because that really represents the old guard of the union leadership versus the new that came in in the early seventies because there were mostly just women clericals, not field people up until then. It was only because there was a lawsuit filed against the park district for not hiring more women into field positions, and the new leadership of the union decided to support that lawsuit.

There was a consent decree that came out that required the park district to hire more women, and this was in the days when there was still affirmative action and those kinds of things were possible. So I think that's probably one of the reasons why the union became more successful is because the women who were coming into the workforce were part of that change in the union, too, and were involved in some of the union offices and being able to negotiate.

McCreery:

As we know, these changes were coming in all parts of our society at that time, the entry of women into other kinds of professions and work situations and elected office and all of those things. And yet it really was rather slow, wasn't it, to be accepted and actually put into place?

Kenny:

Yes. I think there was a bias that, well, women don't know how to do that kind of work, so why should we hire them? We've got this big strapping young guy who can move logs, and we'll get him out there. But I think people were undervaluing all of the things that go into being a park ranger or being a field person, that it's more than just the brawn. There's a lot of things.

And women brought things to the job that hadn't been thought of before, especially dealing with the public because that's a big part of a park ranger's job. I think that that really changed the working conditions for people. They had to adjust—the men had to adjust—but realized that there were aspects of the job that maybe they didn't pay that much attention to.

I know that, for me, especially when I was a park supervisor, one of the most important things that I saw our job being park employees was to have clean facilities: litter picked up on a regular basis, toilets cleaned on a regular basis. I was very insistent that I was part of that, too, as the park supervisor. I did my shifts cleaning the toilets and the showers at the campground. I wanted people on my crew to know that that was important to me.

I think a lot of times the women who came into the workforce realized that that was important. They didn't want to go to a place that was dirty. And some of the male employees, they just kind of blew that stuff off, you know? If they could get away with not cleaning a bathroom or not picking up some garbage, they were fine with it because that wasn't really their job. But so I think that attitude changed with having more women in the workforce, too.

McCreery:

As a practical matter, how often had you worked with women in the field before you were a supervisor?

Kenny:

Not that much. Not in my first years as a temporary. It was only when I became a park—we weren't rangers—a park grounds person or whatever on the vegetation management crew that there was one woman on the crew, and that was the first time I worked directly. Then we had more women brought on. Anne Scheer was one of them. She came and worked on the

vegetation crew. Then, after the vegetation crew I transferred to Briones. I worked at Briones for—five years? Yes, five years.

McCreery:

But as you say, that was a newer park. What was going on there?

Kenny:

That was a lot of trail work and fence work and patrolling, putting in signs. That was another side job I did, a special assignment. But I was doing the implementation when I was at Briones. I learned a lot more about the natural—not history, but the natural setting of a park like Briones and the seasonal changes that happen, which in a lot of the East Bay parks are very subtle. They're not like back east with the change in the color of the leaves and the snow and all that. But I became more attuned to that and the wildlife just because it's an open space park, mostly, and you're in different parts, a lot of times, by yourself. You're doing a job, but you're also absorbing the natural environment. So I felt a lot closer connection from that stint working there.

Then after that I moved to—I was a winter training coordinator for the park district for a winter. Then I had a special assignment as the sign coordinator. Then after that I worked at Crown Beach as a park ranger, and then at Tilden as a park ranger. Then I got hired as a park supervisor.

McCreery:

What does the winter training coordinator do?

Kenny:

It doesn't exist anymore, but at the time it was during the off-season, the winter, when things were a little slower in a lot of the parks. The idea was to bring the park employees in and give them some job skill training on various subject matters, policy things as well as practical hands-on. My job was to organize the classes and hire the instructors and schedule the employees, who was going when.

McCreery:

Who brought you in to do that?

Kenny:

Karen Weber, who was the head of personnel at the time.

McCreery:

That's something of an educational role. How did you like that?

Kenny:

I liked it a lot. It was a challenge coordinating it because you had all these people in different areas, and trying to figure out how to get them all together and find subject matter that people would get something from. But I think people liked it a lot. It was like an institute or a way to get away from your workplace and learn something but also interact with people that you

didn't see that often. Maybe that was another reason why people trusted me a little bit, because I was involved in things like that where they would see me in a different capacity.

McCreery:

What were some of the things you thought were important to convey in those sessions?

Kenny:

Some practical things. I thought this was probably good for people like me or maybe some women who came into the workforce that didn't have all of the particular work skills at the beginning but learned them on the job: some simple carpentry skills, some plumbing skills. But we also had some environmental courses, teaching on plant identification, to give the people who worked in the field a more rounded approach to their job so that they weren't just out cutting grass somewhere and not knowing what it was or that there were wildflowers over there that maybe you didn't cut because you recognized what they were. So those are the kinds of things.

McCreery:

I'm interested in the idea you brought up earlier of Jerry's, of bringing more young people with education into the workforce and opening up broader opportunities for more education, perhaps, among them. I wonder how that integration was taking place over time? What did you observe about the makeup of the field staff?

Kenny:

There were a lot of smart people who came in through field positions who ended up becoming supervisors and managers and administrators like myself. What I also observed was that over time that approach to finding people and then developing them on the job tended to recede. The approach to getting people into the entry-level positions was more based on practical skills than general knowledge, to where you would be hiring park rangers because they had worked at another park agency or they had done landscaping and not necessarily because they had some college education or they had people skills or they had some other subject matter that they were knowledgeable in. It tended to compress the available pool of talent for future growth in the organization.

And actually that's one of the last things I was working on before I retired because my boss at the time, who was John Escobar, the assistant general manager for operations, had the same approach. So we were in sync on that, that we saw that we had good people being hired but they seemed limited as far as the scope of what they could do or wanted to do. We saw a lot of people like ourselves getting to retirement age, and who was going to take our place from within the organization?

He set up a supervisors' academy to help train people. Maybe it was kind of like a reincarnation of some of the winter training, in some ways, but more concentrated on supervisory skills and issues related to being a good supervisor or manager. I was trying to restructure some of the positions in the field so that we could try to tap into getting some people who were maybe broader in their scope and then have the human resources department have a different approach as far as the job description for those entry-level

positions, so that they would hopefully start to get people in that could do the job but also could possibly take on more responsibility.

McCreery:

That's an important point, isn't it, how the jobs are described and what human resources thinks it's trying to do vis-à-vis the needs and the actual staff in the field?

Kenny:

Yes. A lot of times a park supervisor may have their own narrow need for their park, and they want someone who's just a horticultural specialist and that's what they're looking for. They may say, "That's what I want." And human resources is trying to find that person for them. But it just seems to me the trend had gone a little bit too extreme. I know from talking to some of my peers who got hired the same time I did, we would often have the comment among ourselves about, "We probably couldn't get hired now, could we?" [Laughter] Because we didn't fit the mold of what human resources was looking for.

McCreery:

Let's pick up your own trajectory. You said it took you several times to become a supervisor in the long aftermath of the strike.

Kenny:

Yes. There was one department head who I thought had it in for me because I tended to be the steward representing employees in meetings with him, and I won quite a few of those grievances. [Laughter]

McCreery:

A victim of your own success?

Kenny:

Yes. I think. [Laughter]

McCreery:

How did it happen finally?

Kenny:

Well, I think just persistence on my part and also that my reputation as a union representative was not that I was one of the radical people but that I, in negotiations, would try to find consensus and try to come to a solution that was fair to the employees and to the park district. I always stayed on good terms with Dick Trudeau and Jerry Kent, and so those people knew who I was. I think that helped when I finally got—plus that department head was no longer there. [Laughter]

McCreery:

You had done these extracurricular things, serving on committees and so on. What appetite did you have for more leadership roles?

Kenny:

I thought I could contribute more to the district. I thought I had some talents that could be used, as far as organizational things, the way to organize things, maybe bigger issues that could be communicated to the workforce so that they had a broader understanding of things. Sometimes I'd be accused by my crew of giving them too much information, you know? I always thought if they had enough they could see the picture a little better—and give them some context. Sometimes it was too much. [Laughter]

McCreery:

So you became a park supervisor in, let's see, 1985?

Kenny:

Yes.

McCreery:

What was your assignment at the outset?

Kenny:

It was Anthony Chabot. Anthony Chabot at the time was a big park but it was kind of a satellite park because the crew and the supervisor had their offices and their headquarters at Redwood. So every day when they started the day, they would all meet at Redwood and then go out. The supervisor would stay at the office at Redwood unless the supervisor went to the park, and they liked it that way. But on the other hand, what had happened over the years was that it was absentee landlord.

One of the things at Anthony Chabot is a family campground, and it was a little bit on the ragged side, I guess you'd say. It was for the adventurous. [Laughter] It was very rustic, is the word I'm looking for. [Laughter] It wasn't all that formal. Things were a little bit loose. You couldn't sometimes tell where one campsite ended and another one began.

And what happened in the eighties was a lot of homeless people started staying at the campground, and it even got to the point where the park staff was afraid to collect the camping fees because people had been there so long and felt ownership. They even had to send Ned MacKay from the main office out there to collect the fees because he would handle any public relations issues that might come up.

Anyway, it was a bad situation. Everyone in the park administration knew that to really—and this is Jerry's idea, too—it that you don't just have a corp yard and it's maybe off somewhere, and then people go out from there to the various parks and take care of whatever they have to take care of. Then they go back there, and there's really no employee presence in the park.

So one of the things that Jerry and others wanted was that the park staff should be based in the park. So over the years the crew at Anthony Chabot had resisted moving to the park. They liked being at Redwood. It was very comfortable, and they liked socializing with the Redwood crew and other people who would come in there.

But the top administrators decided, "We need to have the service yard right in the middle of Anthony Chabot and have the supervisor and the crew there." They had already had in the works to develop a corp yard and a building and everything before I got hired. So that was one of the things I had to do was make this transition to having this new headquarters and presence, and then trying to deal with the campground. I remember the first time I went out there and drove through the campground. It was scary. I didn't want to be there.

###

Kenny:

Annie worked at Redwood as a park ranger.

McCreery:

Yes, I do want to hear about that, too. We haven't gotten to that yet. So there you were this this new setup of being physically located in Chabot all the time?

Kenny:

Yes. It was a longer drive for people, so I could understand why there was the resistance. But from a park operations point of view, it really made a lot more sense to have the park staff right there, especially with this campground. I wanted and other people in the park district wanted it to be a place where families came and enjoyed camping, a close-to-home place where they could come.

So that meant enforcing the rules, and the rules were you could only be there for a week and then you had to leave, go to another campground. Then you could come back. So it involved setting up recordkeeping and getting employees who bought in to that, too. Then also the hours that people worked were very restricted.

That reminded me of something about the old days versus new. The park staff liked to work from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon and go home. But in a campground people come in until ten o'clock at night, and especially on the weekend you need to have a presence, again. So it means extending hours, having people work late. But that's the only way you can have a consistent policy and enforcement.

###

Kenny:

So that was a big change for the park staff, to extend their hours and also to not just look the other way when people were staying too long in the campground. So I worked to get park police involved, establishing the rules, working with the other campgrounds in the park district to have the same rules for everybody. Eventually it turned it around and made it into more of a family destination.

Then we started getting grants from the state and federal for upgrading and got all the roads redone, with some new loops put in. We got a new shower building built. We got hookups for the RVs so that they had full hookups, which is what people wanted, their hookups. We got an amphitheater installed and got naturalist programs on the weekends. So I think it changed the character completely. We started getting people booking in advance. We had reservations so that our revenue kept going up every year.

McCreery:

You mentioned getting grants, but it also cost you something to change the staffing and revitalize the facilities. What was the overall budgetary picture after all of that?

Kenny:

From the staff point of view, some of the staff didn't like it so they transferred out and went other places. But because we were bringing in more revenue each year, we actually were able to expand the staff and get a bigger budget each year.

McCreery:

So that's a success. And to return the campground to its intended use and improve that use, that facility?

Kenny:

Yes. I think it was just, again, being persistent and establishing some guidelines and framework for things had probably just been neglected for a long time.

One of the things that was a change from the old way of running the parks to the new way that I just remembered was that, like I said, park staff, if they had their preference, would love to work in the daytime Monday through Friday or shorter days, maybe four ten-hour days. The weekends are sometimes the least desirable to work, but the change was that in the olden days people like me, as a temporary, we were the ones who worked the weekends. All of the older guys: "That's for you guys. We've been here, so you guys take it."

McCreery:

"The new guy!"

Kenny:

Yes, who didn't know anything, you know? But the change was—and Jerry was part of this, too, and Steve Jones—was to make sure that you have the regular park staff working weekend days. You can shift it, you can share it. And for a place like Anthony Chabot, also later shifts because I think Jerry and Steve wanted—whenever the parks were being occupied during the daylight, they wanted park staff to be there.

I found that was a challenge when I was the chief because there were some places where you just didn't have enough staff to cover those late hours. But that really was the mandate, and that's completely different from the way it was when I started.

The other was that supervisors were never working on weekends or on holidays. That was something that Jerry and Steve insisted, is that supervisors be at least on one weekend day at least part of the year and then managers also, the field managers. So I incorporated that as part of my view of how parks should be run because you need people who are problem solvers available, especially on the big weekends or the holidays.

McCreery:

And they don't know the full job if they're not there on weekends. There's a different public constituency to some extent, I would think.

Kenny:

Right. Exactly.

McCreery:

What did weekends look like at Anthony Chabot?

Kenny:

Well, Anthony Chabot in some ways is an opposite park to a lot of the other parks. At most parks Saturdays are busy, Sundays are really busy, and then holidays are crazy. At Anthony Chabot, especially the campground part of it, which was where most of the people went, people mostly came in on Friday nights or on Saturdays. Sunday they were leaving. If it was a Monday holiday they might stay on Sunday, but by the holiday time it was like a ghost town. So it was a little bit different.

But that's when things would happen. That's when accidents would happen. That's when there would be special events happening, like horse trail rides or some marathons that they would run on some of the trails. So you need to have experienced people around. I was in the fire department at the time, too, so I felt like, because of my training I wanted to be able to give the best service to the public. So having people who understood how to do first aid and emergency medical response was important.

McCreery:

What other exposure did you have to financial managers as a supervisor there? You talked about the grants and things in connection with the campground, but what kind of a picture did you have?

Kenny:

As far as the day-to-day budget? We would get reports from our finance department, and supervisors would be involved in reviewing their budget every year before it goes through the process and making proposals if you needed things added to your budget like staffing or some resource that you needed for doing a particular job you had. So it was mostly just paying attention to reports that would come from finance and seeing if those matched up with how you were doing as far as running the park.

I think my attention was probably more focused on the revenue aspect, to keep track of that and to find systems to understand when people were using the park and how much

money it was generating and what the needs were of the public who used the park. Probably just because of my union background and being on the bargaining committee, I tended to be the numbers guy so I was always trying to check proposals and double-check the accounting for it to see if it made sense. So I would do some of that with my budget at the park, too, and just double-check for my own purposes and for lobbying for whatever I needed in the future.

McCreery:

It sounds like they were lucky to have you at Anthony Chabot. [Laughter] Was there anything else that you wanted to get done there and didn't get the chance?

Kenny:

Yes. At the time they had a gun range at Chabot, and it was an established concession that had been there since William Penn Mott's time. I had a good relationship with the club that ran it. The park police used it for training every week. But it was pretty annoying to have in the park because it was so close to the campground. It was maybe a couple of ridges over, but at certain times in the day when you'd be in the campground—just picturing having a nice, quiet afternoon—bam! You'd start hearing these blasts. If you went on the trail below the gun range, you were like in a war zone.

So it wasn't really compatible but there was no real outcry at the time to do anything about it. It was something I probably should have been more aggressive, to try to see if we could change that. But now they're gone, so it's been moved and that's great.

McCreery:

It took a long time for that to occur naturally or perhaps to have the political will?

Kenny:

Right. There were some sound tests done that were inconclusive, but that's one thing I would try to do differently. But we did a lot of improvements to the trails and the trail system. There was an established bicycle loop that goes around Lake Chabot and goes through Anthony Chabot, and that seems to be very popular. I think, as far as I can tell, Chabot has become more of a destination for people than it was before I was there, so I think something positive came out of that.

McCreery:

And as you say, reclaiming the campground and establishing the campfire and, I guess, more interpretive program. Those are significant things. How much exposure had you had to the interpretation side of things by that point?

Kenny:

Not that much. I had some connection to them. This actually goes back to the filmmaking. When I was—where was I?—at Briones or winter training? I don't know. Somewhere in the late seventies or the early eighties the district decided they wanted to hire a filmmaker to do a series of different short-subject films for both training and for other purposes. I got assigned to help with that and be part of the crew. So we did some training films for the fire department, training on dealing with wildland fire, and we did an interview with Wallace

Stegner in Tilden. We did some really interesting things. Why did I think about that? Something to do with Chabot.

McCreery:

I was talking about interpretive things, and you mentioned the film connection.

Kenny:

Oh, that's it. Thank you. There were a couple of interpretive subject matters that we were asked to do films about. One of them was Tim Gordon, who was a naturalist at Tilden, who was famous for doing a talk about snakes for kids. They wanted to capture that, and so we did this film on him with snakes. [Laughter] He ended up getting in trouble for what he said on the film, and then I had to defend him as a steward.

McCreery:

My goodness. What did he say, if I may ask?

Kenny:

[Laughter] He was talking about the different kinds of snakes, and he had a gopher snake. He said, "So kids, do you know what a gopher snake eats?"

They go, "Gophers!"

He said, "That's right." He says, "Now I have a king snake. Do you know what a king snake eats?"

They went, "Kings!"

He says, "That's right, and darn! It's not soon enough!"

[Laughter] Somebody took offense at that.

McCreery:

It was this whole broader interpretive program that was very well established, but working in the parks themselves I wasn't sure how much chance you had to see what all that was about.

Kenny:

For a long time, and maybe there still is, there was a separation between interpretive and the park staff, the operations people, even in places where you had a visitor center in a park where the park staff was. Because then I became a manager in interpretive parklands, and I think I had all but one of the parks where there was a visitor center in there. It was difficult to try to get them to work together. That was one of my goals was to try to get more dialog between the park staff and the interpretive staff. In some places it was successful.

McCreery:

I'd like to come back to that. Before we get too far, though, into your management career, let me ask you about the firefighting role. That had gone way back and was a side thing in a

way, but you did it for quite a while. What was the industrial firefighting program at the time you entered it, and who was running it?

Kenny:

The fire chief was Rich Aronson. I had tried a couple of times to get in. I don't know if there was an anti-union bias there or not because there were some people in the fire department who crossed the picket line, so there may have been. Who knows? But I got in in 1981 and stayed in until I was promoted into management in 1997.

It was more an old boys' club when I started. The equipment was handed-down Army surplus, power wagons, and not a lot of emphasis on medical training. It was more just going out when there was a fire and getting the hoses out and spraying it down. No personal protection. A lot of work with hand tools. When I was on the vegetation crew—I wasn't in the fire department at that point, and we were doing controlled burns underneath the eucalyptus. So one of ours got away, so I discovered what fighting the fire was like. It was hard work.

Then gradually over time the fire department changed. It got better equipment. It got better training. We all got our Nomex and our helmets and masks and goggles, and we also got a lot more training in medical, to where we were considered first responders, which I guess now would be an EMT level, is what they train for—which made me feel a lot more confident in my job as a park ranger trying to deal with situations and be somewhat helpful if possible to somebody who got injured.

I was in the Oakland fire. I remember looking out the window here and seeing the big plume of smoke up in the hills. Our son was eight years old then, something like that, so somebody had to look after him. So I told Annie, "Okay, you've got Gabriel. I'm going," and went off to Tilden and got in one of the last trucks out of there.

They told me to go on Grizzly Peak Boulevard to where the fire was creeping down the hill towards Orinda and take a bunch of people with me and deal with it. I had no idea what was going on except that it was a big fire. So we got everybody over, and we stopped the fire from—we saved Orinda. [Laughter] We kept it from going down. It was going the other direction. The wind was blowing it toward the bay.

So at one point I was in the truck, and I was trying to get past a gate. I didn't know what this whole fire was about, so I decided to look on the other side of Grizzly Peak down toward Oakland and could see nothing but foundations and chimneys and a bunch of smoke. Then I knew how bad it was. But I think we were out at the fire for three days, camping at Tilden at the corp yard. Then Annie got to come up. I don't know if my parents took our son or what happened, but she was up there for a couple days.

Quite an experience, especially the couple days after, when they were doing recovery. We were going through neighborhoods and trying to find any victims that were left and just seeing pianos that were nothing left but the metal and things just devastated and cars burned out. It was quite a scene. Did you want to add anything? [Laughter]

Annie Kenny:

[Laughter] I could talk about the fire all day.

McCreery:

Maybe this is a good time to talk about Annie and talk about how and when you met and how your careers intersected. That would be great.

Kenny:

We met when I was on the vegetation management crew. We were headquartered in Sibley, and Annie was working at Redwood. We both were raising chickens for eggs. She lived in Berkeley, and I lived in Martinez. She found out that I could get a cheaper price for chicken feed than she could in Berkeley because we had a feed store out in Martinez then. So I told her I'd get her 100 pounds of chicken feed. Anyway, we met.

Annie Kenny:

Not only a cheaper price, but he could carry 100 pounds of chicken feed. [Laughter]

McCreery:

That helps! [Laughter]

Kenny:

Anyway, we got together after that.

McCreery:

And firefighting? Were both of you doing that?

Kenny:

Yes. I think I got hired first. We had a big party because I had a beard, and I had to shave my beard. So we had the party at her house.

Annie Kenny:

He had to shave his beard to wear the firefighting equipment, to wear the respirator.

Kenny:

That was 1981. What year did you get—?

Annie Kenny:

I don't know. I think it was pretty close to that.

McCreery:

We were talking earlier about the slow but sure addition of more women employees in the parks and in these various roles. But I gather there weren't too many at the time you met?

Kenny:

No, there weren't. She was probably one of the first handful, right?

Annie Kenny:

Right. I was in the first wave in 1974. There were a couple of isolated women that had worked for the park district in field positions before that, but it was spotty. But then in 1974 or around that time, the district was sued by Women's Action and some other groups, the union—

Kenny:

The union supported it.

Annie Kenny:

—because they didn't have enough women and people of color in the field. So after that they hired a bunch of women. I think there was a little desperation about it because of course I didn't have any experience at all. But I learned on the job, and people in the main were good enough to help me out.

McCreery:

How soon were you assigned at Redwood?

Annie Kenny:

I first worked at the Little Farm. That was a hard job. It wasn't just the Little Farm, it was the area around it. People in that area were not very willing to accept a woman in the field position.

McCreery:

How did you handle that?

Annie Kenny:

Sort of, I think, by keeping my nose to the grindstone and trying to figure it out, you know? Trying to figure the position, trying to figure out what we needed to do. I think women are really very responsible when they get a job. I think that was my way of dealing with it.

But my boss fought against hiring me. I heard him yelling on the phone. What happened was, when they decided to hire a bunch of women, they assigned them places and that was unusual. Usually the supervisors got their choice of people. They'd see a pool, and they could pull out whoever they wanted. But they knew that wouldn't work. The management knew that wouldn't work if they had women in the pool. So I got assigned to a place where the supervisor thought he was going to get someone else that he had had before, that he had liked, and so on. So he was really upset.

McCreery:

That's a delicate situation.

Annie Kenny:

Yes. So he made me do some poison oak work. That was my first job. And I didn't get it!
[Laughter]

Kenny:

The test! [Laughter]

McCreery:

And in these parks, that's a pretty big deal.

Kenny:

Especially this year.

McCreery:

And then Redwood was next?

Annie Kenny:

Yes. At first it was a six-month position, and then they opened a full-time twelve-month position. So then I got transferred to Redwood Park.

McCreery:

What was the scene there when you first arrived?

Annie Kenny:

There was another woman on the crew. Actually, there were two women on the crew. There was Laurie Funaroff and Janice Childs. Laurie had been there for several years. In fact, for a while there she was the only crew person. There was no supervisor. There was just her. But Janice and I got hired about the same time and sent to Redwood at the same time. So that was when we became friends. We're still friends. That was good. There were still the same kinds of troubles with guys trying to get used to having a woman on the crew. Some men are feminists and help you out, and some really dug their heels in. We just went la-la-la, you know?

McCreery:

But you had quite a run there, didn't you, at Redwood?

Annie Kenny:

Oh, yes. I was at Redwood the rest of my career, with one—one time I went into Tilden for a few months. But no, I was in Redwood pretty much from 1974 until I retired in 2002.

McCreery:

Oh, gosh. Incredible. What about the firefighting? How did you get interested in that, and how did you pursue that interest?

Annie Kenny:

I got interested in it—I think I liked the trucks. [Laughter] And I liked the training that they were offering. I was always interested in medical training, and at least 60 percent of the runs are medical runs in the park district. So I was interested in helping people that had fallen off their bikes and off their horses and whatever other things that can happen to them in the

parks, getting stung by yellowjackets. That always had interested me before, even before I worked for the park district, knowing things about first aid and first responder stuff.

I had to work hard at keeping in shape so that I could pass the physical every year. They had a physical that got increasingly more difficult. But I was able to do it. I was swimming before work, and so I had my aerobic thing taken care of. It was just strength that I needed, upper body strength. It's harder for women, I think. But I was able to do it.

McCreery:

What exposure did you have to actual fire activity as opposed to medical-type responses?

Annie Kenny:

I was called out at night quite a bit. I would leave here and go up to Tilden in the middle of the fog and take a water tender and take it to fires. I did that quite a bit. I also fought in the big fire. I came in later, after the big thing was mostly doused. But we cut a fire line. I was on a crew that cut a fire line all down Skyline Boulevard to Fish Ranch. I was on many night fires, I remember, just different things that are around the hills there.

Kenny:

Body recoveries. People who would get lost or kill themselves, and the fire department had to go retrieve the body.

Annie Kenny:

Yes, a number of those.

Kenny:

Drownings.

Annie Kenny:

Drownings. I don't think I was ever on a drowning. I was on medical where there was a heart attack up at the gun range, did CPR in the ambulance all the way down to wherever we went to.

Kenny:

I did that for a suicide victim. A gunshot wound.

McCreery:

But you both stuck with it once you entered that?

Annie Kenny:

Yes. We liked it.

Kenny:

In some ways it was a diversion from your regular job. You'd get a little bit of a break from your routine things and get to—

Annie Kenny:

A little more money.

Kenny:

Yes, a little more money.

Annie Kenny:

Yes. There's a fire station at Redwood Park, so when I was assigned there I knew how to get anywhere they needed me because I knew the whole area. I felt competent and in control

McCreery:

And that would be valuable to them when they did need someone to go out to some certain site.

Annie Kenny:

Oh, yes. There were times when people had maps that were wrong. I had to go up and say, "That is not French Trail. That's this trail, and we need to go this way to get there."

McCreery:

Redwood must have been a good fit for you. How do you think about your whole time there?

Annie Kenny:

Let me see. I loved it there. I loved the park. There's such a thing, I think, in these parks that have pressure on them from city dwellers, from all kinds of different pressures, so that loving the park is sometimes a liability in some ways because you see it being overrun, overused, impacted by dogs, especially, and mountain bike riders. So that the peaceful place that I first started working in, which was just incredible, that this little stand of redwood trees has remained, is now something else.

It's even a little bit hard to go back, to see what it's become. I know that a lot of the people that I worked with felt really hamstrung by not being able to be more of a steward of a place because rangers couldn't issue tickets or even really do anything as far as regulation. We could talk to people and use powers of persuasion, but people don't want to hear it. They don't want to hear, "Put your dog on a leash," or that this area is environmentally sensitive, that there are fish in the creek and the dogs can't be there. So it's a mixed bag.

But I met people working there that I would never have met in my whole life, different kinds of people, people with such weird and unusual—from my standpoint—backgrounds, that it was a nice view of the world, another world. [Laughter]

McCreery:

Thank you so much for telling me about that.

Annie Kenny:

Sure, all right.

McCreery:

It's great to get your perspective in. We were just about to get Jack into going into management.

Kenny:

Just one thing before we leave that. I think that when you're stationed in a park and you work in a park for a long time—

Annie Kenny:

And you have ownership—

Kenny:

Yes. I feel this way about parks that I've worked in, is that you find these secret little places and they're yours. Maybe other people know about them too, but it really connects you to that particular piece of land or whatever it is. That's something that I'll always treasure about being able to work in the parks, to have those connections.

McCreery:

It is so personal in a way, isn't it?

Kenny:

Yes. You know just the place where that particular wildflower will show up.

Annie Kenny:

Yes. You know it, and no one else knows that. Or a place where you think, "If I built a house, this is how it would face." [Laughter] "And this is where the light would come in my living room."

###

McCreery:

Hello again, Jack. We're starting up again after a little break. I mentioned just now before we recorded again that I wanted to talk to you also about this period of time when the park district passed Measure AA.

Kenny:

1988?

McCreery:

1988, that's right, a \$225 million bond measure. It came at a very interesting time because you'd had a management transition when Dick Trudeau retired in 1985, and then you'd had David Pesonen in there as general manager. This came, really, at the tail end of his time but growing out of that whole period. I wonder if you could talk about the management change and the whole push to do a bond measure like that, as you saw it from where you sat at the time?

Kenny:

Yes, so in 1988, or just before the bond measure was proposed, I was park supervisor at Anthony Chabot but I was still very involved in the union. I'm not sure what year in there I was president, but I was on the executive board, if nothing else. In the years leading up to 1988, when the budget was being determined there was an after-effect of Prop. 13 that was affecting the park district, like a lot of public agencies in California. There was an established fund for land acquisition that was part of the property tax structure before Prop. 13, and that was wiped out by Prop. 13.

So there was a budget tension every year on how to find more money for land acquisition in the budget. So it was always tempting for the management to look at—and maybe the board, too, because the board was very much in favor of land acquisition—to find a way to carve out some of the monies that went to operations and devote them to land acquisition.

The discussions within the union were, "If we have the property tax and the park district is expanding by getting more properties, then we need to increase the workforce because we're all being stretched to take care of more and more parks and trails." So the union didn't look very favorably on using operational funds toward land acquisition. On the other hand, I think a lot of the people in the union and in the district workforce supported the idea of land acquisition, just in general, because they appreciated the parks that we had and wanted to see more of them.

But there was the tension on how you balance that between money for land acquisition and money for operations. It was always stated that, "Well, the land's not going to be there forever to buy. You can deal with the operational issues some other time, so don't worry about it." [Laughter]

I think because I had been involved in contract negotiations before, to me it was always an issue that needed to be quantified and explained so that the people who were making the decisions on the budget understood the impact and exactly how the parks were being run or what we were losing by not funding enough operational staff and resources. So I had worked, and Jerry had done some stuff on his own in management about how many employees per acre do you need, or per visitor.

I had always been interested in that, and I always tried to bring that contract negotiations, to address the issue of making sure we had adequate staffing to deal withal of the land and the people coming to the parks. But it wasn't a high priority for the union in contract negotiations. The highest priorities were wages and benefits, so it didn't get that far.

But when the district was proposing Measure AA, I remember Janet Cobb was the head of the public information department. I remember she asked me to come into her office, and she explained what the thinking was of why this was being proposed. They wanted to do a much bigger amount of money than had ever been done before because they really wanted to get everyone's attention to this issue and to get people to vote for it. They thought if it was

too small it wouldn't be important enough to get people. They really wanted to make a big splash, and they wanted the union to support it.

We discussed it internally in the union. Jerry Kent was the acting general manager at the time, and so what we proposed to him and to the district was that there be some agreement between the district and the union as far as what would happen after AA, assuming it passed, went into effect, that the district would set aside a certain amount of increase in the property tax base, the regular funding of the park district, for park operations in the future, based on the ratio of land acquisition. So it was kind of a promise that the union would support AA and in the future the park district would support expanding the operations, including staffing, by using a portion of the new funds that came in as the property tax base went up for the park district.

So we agreed to that. Jerry agreed to that. We supported AA. We helped. I was on the campaign committee. So was Steve Myli. We did a lot of campaigning for Measure AA. Luckily it passed, very narrowly. Then it was really the battle every budget time of fighting for those positions and saying, "The district has bought x, y, z properties under AA, so there should be some accounting for that as far as the impact toward park staffing and park needs and operations."

It wasn't a tit for tat. That wasn't how it was accomplished or how it was implemented. What it ended up being—and I don't know if you've heard of this term, the pipeline? There was a list of all of the new properties or developments that the park district was undertaking, not just with AA but any other source of funds, grants or whatever. Then each department that had some impact on that, whether it was park operations, maintenance, fire department, police—they were all supposed to come up with an estimate of what amount of work that would generate for their staff. Maybe a tenth of a park ranger would be needed for that.

Over time those were looked at, analyzed. There would be meetings to review the pipeline list of things that were going to come online as new parks or developments, and then it would translate to maybe a nine-month park ranger somewhere or a new police officer position. So it did filter down and become part of the budget operation of the district, the budget analysis.

McCreery:

How well did that work over time?

Kenny:

From a park operations point of view it probably lacked a little something. I'm not sure when you put things in the pipeline how you could really accurately estimate the impact. There was no method to come up with that. People who had been working in the field or working in maintenance over a long time had a seat-of-the-pants feel about what might that might take, and they'd come up with their best estimate.

But I think it didn't account for things like increased attendance at particular parks, new activities that were happening in parks, the hours that you covered. So I think it was a positive thing to have, but I think it could be improved for the actual day to day. That's why I was still tinkering with all those things to come up with a method that would analyze the different things like weather and attendance and number of acres that you have and that kind of thing. It's very complex in the parks because the parks are so different, and trying to come up with one system to handle all that, that's the challenge.

McCreery:

But AA at least did have built into it some acknowledgement of the operations needs?

Kenny:

Yes. And over time there has been—like with the east county expansion out towards Vasco and Discovery Bay and the delta. Those had been identified as areas where there needed to be positions or budget money added, and over time those have come to—they've happened. They've become true. So it's imperfect, but it's something.

McCreery:

What comments do you have on the changes of leadership at the top, starting when Dick Trudeau retired?

Kenny:

I know when Pesonen first started there was a little bit of trepidation because it seemed like he wanted to change everything and if you were in management, no job was safe. You might not be around much longer. Some people did end up leaving.

He had a lot of good ideas. One impact directly from him, Pesonen, was that he reorganized how the parks were set up. So that was a big change on a field level. Before that everything was geographic and there were eight zones. So you had a zone that was from Point Pinole down through Crown Beach in Alameda. That was one zone. Then moving eastward, you had Wildcat Canyon and Tilden and Redwood and Sibley and Anthony Chabot. That was another zone, and so on.

So you had eight of these. They were a mix of parks, so you could have the Tilden Nature Area and Lake Anza and Anthony Chabot with a campground, all together. In the south you had Del Valle, a very active recreational park, with Sunol, a wilderness park, and then Shadow Cliffs. And so you had a mix of those kinds of parks.

What Pesonen did is he grouped the parks by type of park. So there was an interpretive parklands unit. These were the big open space parks like Sunol and Las Trampas and Black Diamond. It didn't matter how far away they were geographically. They were all considered one type, so they were in there.

Then they had shoreline parks, so you all the parks along the shoreline, all the way from Coyote Hills all the way around to the delta. Then recreational parks were grouped together, so you had Roberts and Cull Canyon and Don Castro. Those were grouped together.

And lakes: Lake Chabot and Del Valle, Shadow Cliffs and Contra Loma. They were grouped so that there was an affinity of interest among the people who worked in the parks and the managers who were connected with them, the theory being that they would understand the needs of the parks better, and they'd be able to share information.

I liked the idea, myself. I thought it made sense. Practically it has some drawbacks because, as the parks have grown over time, there have been more parks and they don't fit into some of the categories. Sometimes equipment that you have is closer to a park that may be in a different unit than yours, and sometimes sharing equipment becomes difficult because they have their own priorities. But I think it did bring people together for having a common purpose and focus for the type of parks that they were in. That helped me when I was in interpretive parklands as the manager.

McCreery:

What's your take on what happened during those two and a half years that David Pesonen led the agency and why he left?

Kenny:

What happened is that everything seemed to get shaken up and then rearranged, and people had to figure out a new way of doing things, which wasn't all that bad as far as I was concerned. During those two years—it's hard to remember exactly what happened, but it went by so quickly. I wasn't in management, so I wasn't directly affected. I don't know what else I can say about that time.

Then when Pat O'Brien came in it became much more of a businesslike approach to how parks were run. I think that was really when the pipeline started to become an institution of the park district. I'm trying to think what issues were happening with the union at the time, besides AA. I just can't think of anything right off the top.

McCreery:

You gave as one of the key changes of the Pesonen era this move to reorganize how the parks were set up, and your first example was the interpretive parklands unit. That was your transition into management, to lead that. Talk about how that happened and who hired you into it? What was the transition like and the decision to do it?

Kenny:

I had tried for a unit manager position previously, and I thought I could bring something to the job, to organize things like I had done at Anthony Chabot. I had maybe a broader range of topics that I was familiar with so that I could be adaptable wherever it was needed. I was encouraged by some of the park supervisors who worked in interpretive parklands. Once they found out their manager was retiring, they encouraged me to apply. They thought I would be a good fit for their unit.

McCreery:

And who was it you replaced?

Kenny:

Mel Thompson, who came to the district as a naturalist, and he was a naturalist for a while. That was one of the after-effects of the strike. They had people doing their regular job as a supervising naturalist or as a park supervisor in addition to overseeing the parks. They called them zone managers. Anyway, he was a naturalist.

Steve Jones was the chief of parks at the time, and he's the one who hired me for interpretive parklands. I think he saw what I was able to do at Anthony Chabot, and he had supported that. It had been a turnaround from the way the park had been previously, plus he knew my experience with the union and that I had some leadership qualities. So I think that's why he hired me.

Interpretive parklands had some issues going on regarding trying to coordinate between the naturalists, the interpretive, and the park staff. That was one of the things I tried to do was try to establish more ongoing coordination between the supervising naturalist and the park supervisor.

McCreery:

How could they coordinate better?

Kenny:

Just by talking to each other. A lot of times they hardly ever got together and went over things together. They were in their own separate silos. And find a way for the staffs to work together. In some places it was already okay and it worked better than others. But it was just trying to make that a priority for them to do that.

The other big issue was cattle grazing. A lot of the park supervisors in those parks felt like there was a disconnect between the park district policy on grazing and what they saw as the visual effect of grazing in the parks. It took a while for me to understand the issue itself because I hadn't been that familiar with it.

I started getting a lot of different people involved to work on the issue, and we put together a group of unit managers that had grazing in their parks—and not just interpretive parklands but there were others that had grazing—to look at the policy that we had and work with the people in the stewardship department, who were the people who ran the leases themselves with the ranchers.

So it was like, from a park staff point of view, it was something that was being done in the park that you had no control over. But it was one of the complaints you got from the public about either the way the park looked—they'd say it was trashed and there was no grass on the hillside, and that's not what a park should look like—or they felt intimidated by having cattle in the park. Some people felt like they would get trampled, or they had to be careful about the animals, or they didn't like the cow manure on the ground, whatever it was.

The ranchers didn't have to deal with the park supervisor. They just dealt with the person who ran their lease, who was in the headquarters office. So it was a disjointed

approach. We got together, like I said, the unit managers, we got together the people from stewardship. In interpretive parklands, in my own unit, I had the resource of the Botanic Garden director. He was one of my direct reports, and so he understood the importance of grazing as well as what things contributed to managing grassland.

We got some seminars put together to help educate the staff and came up with a new policy that ended up having park staff responsible for meeting with the grazers every year and going over the guidelines and actually measuring how much grass was left at the end of a grazing season so that there was some scientific evidence of whether we were overgrazing or undergrazing.

But anyway, it got the park staff more involved in the whole process, and they had a little more ownership of what that was like so they could be proud of how the park looked as well as be able to explain to the public what the purpose of the program was and how we were protecting natural resources—and also be able to direct complaints to the grazer and, if they had a problem cow, get that cow out of there. Or if the cattle had been in one area of the park too long, to get the cattle moved. The whole reason is for fire safety but not to destroy the grassland so it doesn't come back.

So it made some very interesting connections with people, some people who were doing sustainable grazing in other parts of the state. They came and spoke to our group and talked about what their approach was. That's the first time I had ever heard of grass-fed beef and why that's so good. We actually, in the park district, by growing our grass and having cattle come in and eat it, and then if they became grass-fed we're just utilizing the solar energy to produce a product that's healthy, too.

McCreery:

It sounds like you achieved a lot of buy-in over time, but how hard a sell was it for some of these stakeholders?

Kenny:

I think for park staff, they were ready for it, although they had had some negative relationships with some of the grazers who were old-school cowboys, who felt like that's what they did all their life and just because that piece of land happened to be park property they weren't going to treat it any differently. If you had something to say that they couldn't relate to because you're not a cowboy, then they just dismissed you.

But over time, having more interaction with each other helped a lot, and it evolved to the point where we had an annual dinner for the grazing tenants, and the unit managers would cook a barbecue, and then we'd serve it, and the park staff would be there. We'd then have a little talk at the end, maybe about what our goals are and maybe highlight some good things that happened during the year. I think it's not annual anymore because it was a lot of work to do it every year, but I think it's still going on.

McCreery:

But you were building relationships for the long term, here?

Kenny:

Right. The other thing is that the people in stewardship who were picking these tenants—basically they didn't always consult with park staff or have park staff on the panel. By getting the park supervisor or manager there, you could look for a tenant who maybe had a different approach that might be more compatible with the park. If it was just the grazing manager looking for someone to fill that slot, they may have just thought, "I just need someone in here who's going to have the cattle and is going to take care of grazing, getting the fire hazard down." That's all they're concerned about. So bringing another perspective into it.

McCreery:

But that's another example of the bigger, broader view prevailing over time, really to the benefit of everyone. What about the view of the upper management and board on the matter of grazing? How much did you have input or interact with that?

Kenny:

Quite a bit. That was something that the park district was—how do I say this?—it was a tenet of the park district that grazing is a good thing. Then there started to be a number of critics, some of whom were suing the park district. So I think the official stance became somewhat defensive about saying that, "Grazing is good. You don't know what you're talking about, and we don't want to lose a lawsuit."

It was something where we had to just keep working at it and showing the benefits of having the cooperation, so that it became a stronger program. We weren't just defending it because we liked grazing. It was because we want to do responsible grazing, and we want to do it in a way that helps the environment, and these are the ways that it helps—spelling it out a little more.

I think over time upper management supported the approach, and the board went along with it, too, because they got a lot of complaints about grazing, and I think they wanted a more defensible program. I think that's what it ended up being.

McCreery:

What a long haul, though. It sounds challenging. What did you learn from the whole grazing issue?

Kenny:

[Laughter] I think I learned that you can apply a positive approach to things, and if you're on the right track you can be successful with it. I learned that it's a complex issue, and I learned the whole history of grasslands in California, in the East Bay in particular, and why things look the way they do and why we have the fire hazard that we do. We've changed the ecology since the Europeans came here, and so we're reacting to that.

The public thinks things are pristine, but they're not. It's a part of doing public education—educating yourself and educating the public about what's out on the land and

how to adapt to it with the realities of today. We don't have herds of animals that can go through an area, like buffalo, and reduce the fire hazard, so we have to compromise and come up with a way to do it with the resources we have now, like cattle or sheep or goats, but direct that in a way that is toward the goal that you want to get.

McCreery:

What else can I get you to talk about for managing interpretive parklands? That's a big job in itself with a big budget, a lot of people. How did you approach that new management role?

Kenny:

To get out and learn as much as I could about each of those parks, and spend time with the park supervisors and the staff. We would have unit meetings, which every unit manager does on a regular basis, and I tried to make them more educational for people or fun and get people to interact more from different staffs. Interpretive parklands are spread all over the two counties, and they rarely would see each other except for maybe at holiday time or if you had some special thing set up.

So I had a few times where we had naturalists come in and do classes on raptors or particular natural resource issues. I made sure that the park staff was part of learning about the grazing issue. There was a lot of park staff, I think, that just had a negative reaction to it. They didn't understand why we had it, and they didn't like having to deal with it. So it was that. I think it was mostly just getting more people together and getting these issues out in the open.

McCreery:

You also had a lot of exposure to, as you put it here, interagency experience, all the other public entities and some private ones that you come in contact with in these settings.

Kenny:

Right. A lot of parks you're probably familiar with have either—it might be next to another open space that's another agency, or there's a lease arrangement for the park to exist that we don't own the land but we lease it. So that's an issue at a place like Sunol, where a lot of the park is leased from San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. We have places that are connected with East Bay MUD, their open space, and with Contra Costa Water District. It's funny. Some of these agencies, there's an institutional history that you walk into that you have to start understanding the dynamics of.

McCreery:

Contra Costa Water District might be a good example of that.

Kenny:

Yes, right. [Laughter] They changed their general manager, so there was a whole change that happened while I was there. It went from being very suspicious of the park district and very—well, they could attribute negative things to park district people that were very innocent. But over time it seemed like there was a better relationship that developed because there were a lot of changes in people in power in those positions.

San Francisco PUC, an agency that's been around since, what, the 1880s or whatever? Their main thing is delivering that water from Hetch Hetchy, and you're just a little tiny cog in their system. Trying to get them to recognize your issues is sometimes interesting.

McCreery:

It sounds as if all the exposure you'd had, though, to outside entities could really serve you well in this position?

Kenny:

I think it did, like with the EPA. Or even as a park supervisor you have connections with other agencies sometimes. Yes. It gave me an understanding that I need to learn what the particular institution is like and what their issues have been and how we can work together going forward.

McCreery:

What about the structure of the staffing within interpretive parklands. Did you see a need for any adjustments there?

Kenny:

Yes. That's probably the place where, if you just look at land acreage, it's the most egregious or unbalanced. You've got some places with thousands of acres of open space and maybe two rangers assigned. So covering that seven days a week with very little overlap is a challenge for some places. But then again you've got—

And then when I became chief of parks you see the counter-argument, which is you've got some parks that are just overwhelmed with people during the summer and on the weekends. I know those staff are thinking, "Look at those people in the interpretive parklands. They don't have anybody coming to their parks in the middle of summer. It's too hot. They're just riding in the trails. What do they have to do? We've got to deal with all this garbage here."

I can understand why you couldn't maybe staff it as well as you could to protect some of those open space areas, but I'd say in general those were places that I would see as needing more staff and maybe working arrangements with some of the high-use parks so that you could lend some of those people in their busy time, some way to come up with some more flexible areas where people could be shared back and forth.

McCreery:

And that's a great concept, and yet perhaps a little difficult to put into place given that people are accustomed to what they've always known.

Kenny:

Right. Exactly. That's why they went to work in that park. They went there because they wanted to be in a place where they didn't have a lot of people, and they could be out on the

trails. So when they get overwhelmed with people, well, that's the way it goes. Their idea wouldn't be, "Oh, now I have to go switch and go work in a park where there's a thousand picnics happening."

McCreery:

You had a lot of experience not only in different parks in other jobs but also representing people through the union and having a lot of chances to negotiate or bring people together and so on. And yet, this is a hard job in terms of all of those things. How did you carry out this new management role, given that you'd come from the field staff? What kind of distrust or hesitation did you get from your former peers?

Kenny:

I'd say most people were pretty welcoming. I don't remember there being a lot of negativity. People were glad for me to get the job, and I knew a lot of the people who were the supervisors and the staff in those parks, probably from union things or fire department. So they weren't completely unfamiliar to me.

McCreery:

You were still one of them, in a sense?

Kenny:

Yes. I mean, they knew I was management so I was going to be in a different role and have different responsibilities, but I think I was willing to work with them and they were willing to work with me. So I think it went pretty smoothly. I think I had their trust.

McCreery:

What else was important to you to accomplish or change in that role?

Kenny:

You mean aside from balancing the needs of the parks?

McCreery:

Yes, which I understand is a big part of it.

Kenny:

Yes. I think what I really wanted to see was better communication with the staff internally, with other departments, especially interpretive. The public, when they come into a park, they don't distinguish between one department or another. They just see a park, and they see park staff. They think everyone is working together. That's what I wanted to see, more cooperation between the interpretive staff and the park staff. I wanted to see the staff appreciate the parks that they worked in, what resources they had there and be proud of it. I think a lot of them were, but for some people it was just job and they didn't appreciate that.

McCreery:

You gave a good example of the grazing-related information as a way they could increase that knowledge and take greater pride and understanding.

Kenny:

Yes, right. I think those are the main things.

McCreery:

Then, as you say, becoming chief of parks—perhaps a natural segue, but how did that happen?

Kenny:

Before chief of parks, Ron Russo was going to retire, and so he approached me and asked if I would be interested in taking over his position when he retired on a temporary basis. I thought since I was in interpretive parklands, and I knew some of the interpretive people and what they did, and we had tried to bridge some of the gaps between them and park staff and had some more joint effort going on, that it would be an interesting challenge, things that I hadn't been totally exposed to before.

John Escobar was Ron's boss, and so he asked me if I wanted to do it and I said I did, so I tried it. Then I got the position on a regular basis after a few months, so that was in 2003. That was including the interpreters and all the visitor centers, the exhibit lab, the prep lab where they do all the exhibits for the visitor center, and all the lifeguards, and all the recreation staff, including the reservation people.

I was just fascinated to learn a lot of this stuff that I found at the visitor center. The exhibit lab was amazing, just to see how they did some of the things they did. They have an aquarium at Crown Beach, so they have to go get live crab every so often, even when it's not in season. So I got to go with them to do some crabbing and see how they did that. I went to some interpretive training. So it was great just to get those experiences.

The big challenge in that job—not only getting people to talk to each other, which is always the thing you've got to do—was to somehow integrate recreation and interpretive together because the recreation department was something that Pat O'Brien wanted to have as a feature in the park district. It was always something that people didn't know how that fit with interpretive because interpretive people were offering programs, recreational peoples were offering programs. Sometimes they overlap. Recreation people, their programs, they're charging money for it. Interpreters are not. So the interpreters saw recreation as a threat.

The other issue was—and this gets back to union stuff—is that the board and upper management, for a long time, had wanted there to be a docent program at the various visitor centers. The naturalists had fought it tooth and nail in almost every negotiations. They saw it as a threat to their jobs, that docents were going to come in and were going to start doing programs. So that was a big bone of contention.

One of the things that I attempted to do was to start a docent program. There had been some docent programs in existence, but only at a couple of the visitor centers. We were trying to do this system wide. At this point I was on the management side of the negotiating

team for collective bargaining, and it was one of the things that we got through negotiations and then it had to be implemented.

I was one of the ones that helped to start the new docent program, the district-wide docent program, with help from my boss, Escobar, and human resources, Susan Gonzales, meeting with all the naturalists. I'd say it was somewhat successful. There's still a lot of foot-dragging among some of the naturalists, from what I understand.

McCreery:

Still today?

Kenny:

Yes. So I don't know how successful it is right now, but it changed the conversation. It changed from resistance to now at least there's a structure there and there's some openness, in some places more than others. But it's not a closed door. So I think that was a success.

Recreation and interpretation: Since I've been gone, they've merged recreation and interpretation, so now that have—oh, I helped to create a position that was like what was in park operations, where you had a park crew and a park supervisor and then a unit manager over a number of park supervisors. In interpretation you just had the naturalists, a supervising naturalist, and then Ron Russo, or the chief. But there was not a buffer in between someone who could advocate for interpretive. So I helped to get that position created, and since then what they've done—I think it's really smart—is they took that interpretive manager position and the recreation manager position and they created two positions that are both interpretive and recreation, one for the north and one for the south. It's an idea of recognizing that you need to merge the two together because you're both providing services, outreach services, and utilizing each other's assets together. I think that's a positive outcome of that.

McCreery:

That was an interest of a lot of people, to see that develop, but it took a long time.

Kenny:

Yes. I don't want to take all the credit for it, but I think my role is that I was able to at least, because people trusted me for my union background, that they felt confident. They were willing to try it, even though I was proposing it as their chief now, as opposed to a union rep.

McCreery:

They could perhaps hear it from you better than some others?

Kenny:

Yes, right.

McCreery:

Congratulations. That does sound like quite a feat. What are your thoughts on how that serves the public better?

Kenny:

I think it's more seamless. You have people who have a background in natural history as well as a recreational activity that can work together on a program. It can give them a fuller experience. It's not as regimented, and I think it also makes the naturalists more accountable because they have to be within a system offering all these different programs. If people don't sign up for a paid program, you can tell whether it's popular or not. You can't always with the other that's free. So it's another way of accounting things, since they're all in the same system. And you utilize the resources better.

McCreery:

That certainly does stand out, though, as something that has been a long-term challenge. As you say, there's still some resistance today. What other tweaks to it have there been since your time that you know of, or is the system you put in pretty much still going?

Kenny:

I really don't know. I just see what the structure is, and I've heard how they merged the positions, but I don't know a lot more of the details.

McCreery:

Thank you. Let's talk about being chief of parks. How did that come about?

Kenny:

Okay. I was chief of interpretive and rec, and Steve Jones was the chief of parks. He was getting ready to retire at the end of 2005. There were three chiefs. There was maintenance—that was Anne Scheer—myself as interpretive, and Steve Jones. That group would meet with John Escobar, the AGM of operations on at least a weekly basis or more often. But you really know what's happening in operations when you're in the chief position in that role because you hear from your counterpart in the other department about what they're dealing with. Sometimes you're involved in working with that chief.

I had been a unit manager under Steve Jones, so I had an idea. I had acted for him a few times when he'd be on vacation, so I had an idea of what the job was like. I thought I should try for it because I'm familiar with a lot of the parks, and it was a bigger job than what I was doing.

McCreery:

How much competition was there for it?

Kenny:

None. This was not one that was posted for outside people. It was only internally. I think it's a benefit from being around a long time, that if you've been in an organization and you've done different jobs and people have gotten to know you and see what you can do—and I think that particular job is so complex a lot of people didn't want to do it. I guess I was the next logical person. [Laughter] But I wanted to do it.

For the first two or three years, I would say, it was pretty overwhelming. It wasn't that I didn't know a lot of the topics or the parks, it was the volume of it. Once you're there and you have all the parks, then you just can't imagine the volume that comes in, the complaints on a particular issue or some controversy somewhere—a lot of personnel issues, just because that's the biggest department in the whole park district. So that's where they're going to happen, where you have a lot of people.

After I got through two or three years and I could see some issues starting to repeat and could see some patterns a little bit, then I felt a little freer to be more myself in the job and take on things that I wanted to work on, like that whole thing I mentioned about looking at the staffing levels. There were some positions that had been created in negotiations in 1998 that had been a problem and needed to be resolved, and I started working on that. I didn't finish it. Anne Scheer finished it, luckily, because she took over as chief of parks after Jeff Wilson, who followed me.

McCreery:

But you knew you wanted to work on that, and you had a vision for it, shall we say?

Kenny:

Yes. Right. I got people from the unit managers together, plus some representatives from park staff to come together to look at where we were as a department and gather some data about that and start to put together some framework to justify why we should change some of the positions to make them more effective for park operations.

Then there were little things that would come up, like the quagga mussel crisis, dealing with that and putting in a system to do inspections. That was another one working with other agencies because then you're working with not only nearby ones but agencies that are connected as far as a regional policy, like Santa Clara county parks and again, Contra Costa Water, and East Bay MUD, San Francisco PUC. It was a bigger impact as far as what was happening in the state.

McCreery:

Speaking of the state, what interaction did you have with the California State Parks and the management of certain of those parks here in the district.

Kenny:

I had interactions somewhat regarding Del Valle, but more it was Eastshore State Park because that was just becoming developed. The park district was trying to figure out what our role was because the state parks were not going to operate the park. They wanted the park district to do it, and we were just doing it as kind of a fill-in role because the contract hadn't been signed for long-term management.

That was one of the more difficult relationships because we had the money to operate things and we had a certain vision of how it should be operated, like we operated other shoreline parks. But the state didn't have any money to give us to operate the park, but they

had a certain way they wanted it done and were very insistent on certain aspects of it. So that was a difficult one to work through.

McCreery:

As an aside, what view do you take of the state of the state parks, shall we say, the financial and other things that we've all heard so much about the last couple of years, their management? How do you see all that?

Kenny:

I don't know their management structure that well, but I know they have a lot of parks that are in deep trouble as far as deferred maintenance and things that need to be done. I can see where they have a lot of needs, but I don't know their structure that well to really say much about it.

McCreery:

The ones managed by East Bay parks are not among them, but yes, for any state park—

Kenny:

For the ones that we managed for them, we had more resources and we had a higher standard than they were able to do. I don't think it's the people who run it. That's not their fault. It's just they've been underfunded.

McCreery:

It's a pity to see parks threatened with closure, and on and on.

Kenny:

Yes. It's a great system, too.

McCreery:

Yes, it really is. Just more on being chief. You had responsibility for a lot of employees. You had a big budget. As a management job, it is a whole different level, in a sense. How did that go for you?

Kenny:

I think it went pretty well. I think, like I say, it was a lot to handle for a couple of years. I think I was pretty comfortable being able to present things to the board and interact with the board and to management on various issues that would come up, coming out of park operations. I was still involved with the grazing quite a bit in that role.

I was again asked to be on the negotiating team for the district during that time. It always takes a lot of your time and effort to be successful at that, and I think it was okay as far as the end result.

McCreery:

I don't know how close you were to the actual negotiations, but it's the effect of the other side of the table, in a sense. What was that like for you?

Kenny:

It was a little strange. I would often get accused by my management counterparts. When there was a section in the union contract that they wanted to modify and they wanted the union to respond to it, they'd always in our separate meetings they would say, "Jack probably put that in the contract." [Laughter]

I didn't really, but I was on teams that negotiated it. So it was funny. But it's a very formal role that you have to take, I guess somewhat like kabuki theater, where you have to put on a face. And the other side does, too. You can see it. I think it was okay for the union side to have me there, and we had some good back and forth on various topics.

McCreery:

Do you feel the negotiations turned out well enough for all the parties?

Kenny:

I think so. That's where I learned that there are factions within the union and there are factions within management, that there are some people on the union side who want to go for the most and are going to do whatever they can to get it, and the same thing on the management side in reacting to the union stuff. It's trying to find a course that is acceptable for you to get an agreement but also for the board to buy into and for everyone afterward to be able to live with. There were some times when it seemed like we were having a harder time convincing people on the management side than we were on the union side.

McCreery:

What's an example, if you think of one?

Kenny:

It might be something related to how the cost-of-living clause would be applied. You usually have some idea of what the cost of living is in the year that you're negotiating, but future years you don't know what that's going to be so you set up a formula. There might be one formula that you're able to get the union to agree to, but maybe not your management overseers that give you direction on negotiation.

McCreery:

You mentioned the board. I wonder how active a role they were playing in these matters, even if they weren't in negotiations directly?

Kenny:

They always want to be advised of what the issues are and what the two sides are asking of each other, what the union wants, and how much it would cost, and what the district wants to get out of the negotiations. I'd say, at least when I was there, all the board members had an opinion, some stronger than others. Sometimes the union would hurt themselves by some of the tactics they would do to put pressure on the board members. I think the negotiations after I retired were much more contentious because there was some friction between the union and board members. I think that has changed a little bit since the last election.

McCreery:

It's a tricky matter, and there are always so many factors. It must have been interesting for you to go through it in a different role this time, with all you knew about the other roles.

Kenny:

Yes, right. And sometimes I knew more about the union position than the current union people, who were on the other side of the table. Like I maybe knew the history of something better than they did. I think I was a resource for our lead negotiator, Susan, to be able to explain how things got into the contract, whether I wrote them or not. [Laughter] And I was involved in my role as the chief as part of the general manager's labor-management board that he has that meets once a month, unless there's negotiations, and if it's negotiations it's once a week, advising the general manager.

McCreery:

That's an interesting role too. How did that play out?

Kenny:

That was, again, trying to work with the different factions within the executive team of the district. Sometimes people in the upper levels who maybe haven't been involved with the union don't understand where the union is coming from and might have a reaction against something because the union proposed it. It's an opportunity to maybe explain things and try to get a more balanced view going.

McCreery:

You appear to have great diplomatic skills.

Kenny:

[Laughter] Maybe, or maybe too much information.

McCreery:

What else stands out to you about your time as chief, and how do you summarize that role?

Kenny:

I think it's having an understanding of the complexity and the great number of things the park district offers, having a better appreciation. Because that was one of the things that I got out of being chief, is that—not that I did this every day—but I could at some point just go off to any part of the district to see what was there. There are just amazing parks out there and amazing people working in the parks.

Just to grasp, I guess, the hugeness of the park district and what's involved in that because you do get touched by just about every part of it in that role.

McCreery:

Any regrets?

Kenny:

No. No, I had a great time there, worked with great people. Maybe a regret is that I could have stayed to see through some of these things that I was working on. But retirement is pretty good too. [Laughter]

McCreery:

What did cause you to retire at the time you did—it looks like June 2010? How did you make the decision?

Kenny:

Annie had already retired in 2002, and I saw that she was having a great time. It was really the stress of the day to day, being responsible for all the different things that had come in. Like I said there's a lot of personnel issues, and those could be very draining. It just looked to me like retirement was a good option for being able to spend more time at home and do other things while I was still healthy and Annie was healthy, and there were good people who could take over. And there were.

McCreery:

You had done some of the work to put that in place, certainly, along the way.

Kenny:

Yes.

McCreery:

I wonder what else I should have asked you. Do you think of anything important that we missed?

Kenny:

No, but I did want to point out to you—we talked about my film thing at the beginning. This is what I'm involved with now.

McCreery:

Oh, yes, please. You had mentioned this to me in your email note, the Albany Film Fest. This took place in March this year.

Kenny:

Right. So we just had our seventh one. This one was the most successful yet. We now have most of the shows at the Albany theater on Solano, so we have the big screen and a big audience. This year we expanded from one day to a whole week. I may have mentioned that. One of the features we had was, one night we had—we feature mostly short films, and we were able to get five short films with environmental themes.

Somehow I was able to convince the park district to underwrite it, so they were the underwriters for that "Think Green Night," is what we called it. So it comes full circle.
[Laughter]

McCreery:

It really does. Congratulations!

Kenny:

Yes, we had some great films. So that's the thing that's nice now, is to have that connection, have the film and the park district and environmental stuff, to still have a connection to all of that.

We always like it when we have the filmmakers or someone connected with the film there to talk after the film, so we had a bunch of people from those environmental films there. One was about wildfires. Another one was about controversies about eucalyptus in Tasmania and cutting the ancient eucalyptus forests of Tasmania. Another one was about the climate change conference in Paris and people who were trying to do a human sculpture related to that but got interrupted by the terrorist attacks that happened, and what happened with all of that.

Anyway, there were people from all those movies there, so it was great to get the audience to be able to hear more about those subjects and talk to the filmmakers.

Then our regular show, we have an all-day screening of shorts on one of the days. We always ask, if there are filmmakers in the audience, to come up. I don't know if you saw the movie *Philomena*, about the Irish adoption? Somebody submitted a documentary about a woman in New Jersey, I think, who found out she was adopted from Ireland. She did all this research and was able to find birth mother back in Ireland, went back and met her, and then found out she had these other relatives. So it was a very moving story, and she actually met the real Philomena.

Anyway, it turned out she was in the audience! And the filmmaker. They came all the way from Connecticut. So we got to introduce them to the audience, and they got to answer some questions and sign some autographs. So that was fun.

McCreery:

That's great. You're ready for the international stage, shall we say? It seems like the Albany Film Fest is really coming along.

Kenny:

[Laughter] Yes, it's making some strides.

McCreery:

And as you say, full circle on some the subject matter and your interests.

Kenny:

Yes. We had a women's panel, with women filmmakers from the Bay Area having their short films. That's why we have this pink shirt. This is for the "Think Pink" show. That's actually for Anne Scheer. She bought that. I've got to get that to her.



So that was cool. One of the films—you know the Chabot Space and Science Center? She filmed it there. It's a science fiction movie. It was a short, and then we found out after the film fest that it's been picked up as a feature, so we may be seeing it.

McCreery:

Good luck. I hope you can keep working on that for many years to come. The sky's the limit.

Anything else you want to say about the park district, in summary? I really congratulate you on an incredible forty-year run or more.

Kenny:

I was lucky to be able to be there and to have the time there, have a great job and benefits, especially retirement. It's a great place to work. I hope I contributed something. I wasn't a major player that did some big addition to the park district or something, but I think I contributed in a way to make it work a little better so I'm proud of that.

McCreery:

Very much so. And now you've contributed by telling your story for the record, and I really appreciate that. Thank you for all this time today.

Kenny:

Sure. Yes. Thanks for coming by.

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